Good Endings Only

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Good Endings Only

by Chaussette_et_Chaussures

Summary

You've always considered yourself a relatively easy going person, your students seem to think so, as does your loving boyfriend. So when you sign up to tutor a rich kid in geometry to make a little extra cash on the side, you had certainly not expected to hate the man who greeted you at the door.

You hate him. You hate him to the point of violence.

_____

Reader takes a job tutoring Eridan and things go so wrong and so right.

Notes

Eyyyyyyyy so this is by far the longest thing I've written to date. I have most of chapter two done. This should be 3-4 chapters.... I was hoping to have this up a lot sooner but life lmao. This is my first time writing smut, but that's going to just be the last chapter so it'll be a while

In Which You Meet the Slimiest Family Imaginable

Putting yourself through grad school was tough even when the university was paying you a stipend for teaching lab classes for freshmen. You made barely enough to cover your crappy apartment and between grading papers and working on your degree you had to admit getting another job was just about out of the question. Your social life was nearly nonexistent, your sleep schedule was poorer than you were, and your students' lab reports were more than a little tedious to sort through. God so many of these assholes had bad handwriting.

But your fridge was just a little too barren for comfort, and your steady diet of ramen noodles and nicked food from the dining hall wasn't doing anything for your health…. If you started developing scurvy the medical costs would break you for sure.

So with a heavy heart you had signed up with one of those fancy tutoring sites that rich kids trying to get into prestigious universities relied so heavily upon. The work load would be easy, just a few hours a week, and the payout may not have been the greatest, but it would be enough to put something more than a heavy dose of sodium and carbs into your body… hopefully.

God you were hungry for real food… fancy roasted potatoes with fresh herbs and some kind of fresh produce and maybe portabello mushrooms sounded good right about now.

You sighed, willing your hot pepper ramen to taste like something other than spicy salt noodles while you waited for someone to be assigned to you. After a few hours you finally gave up. You supposed it was only natural given the local high schools had only just begun classes. But it still stung as you graded your students' papers… maybe one of them would be nice and give you a gift. Your birthday was coming up soon. Not that they knew it….

And it wasn't like your boyfriend could afford to do anything fancy for you either given he was halfway across the country and somehow poorer than you were. Most of the money that wasn't spent on groceries or school or rent you squirreled away so you could visit him.

You groaned and laid back on your futon.

It took a full week before you were contacted by anyone about the tutoring position. A sophomore at a highschool just a few towns over wanted help with his geometry course. You could already taste that easy money as you read his name on the screen. Ampora, Eridan.

Okay, maybe not so easy money. When you exchanged emails with them Eridan was more than a little condescending and elitist; Outright refusing to meet you at the library, or the university campus, or even the cushy private school he attended. He'd asked what GPA you'd graduated with, but seemed to tone his crazy down when you'd told him your credentials,

giving you his address and the time he was willing to meet you. But for what he would be paying, you couldn't really complain too much.

So when you'd arrived at his house in your beat-up sedan (just a few years younger than you were) a few days later, and you were met with the most ostentatious abode you had ever seen you silently resolved to do whatever you had to do to make sure this partnership worked.

You knocked on the door with the brass knocker, standing there awkwardly in your good khakis and a dark blue button up while you waited for an answer.

It took about a minute, not that you were counting of course (you definitely were), for someone to open the door. Grey skin and a sharky smile was not what you were expecting.

Oh, this was a troll household.

They were trolls.

Not that that changed anything. You weren't put off by it, but they tended to mostly keep to themselves after first contact a few years ago. Eridan referring to his *hive* made much more sense in retrospect.

And you weren't going to lie, the troll standing before you was an attractive specimen. Tall, violet eyes framed by dark lashes, high cheekbones, and proud orange horns that swept back along his head like a pair of twin lightning bolts. The greaser aesthetic he was very obviously emulating was a nice touch; His dark hair slicked back, an unlit cigarette held between his pretty lips. He let out a low whistle, teeth perfectly even and symmetrical, and when he spoke it invoked the most violent fight or flight response you had ever felt.

"Well what do we have here?" He said with the worst approximation of a Brooklyn accent you had ever had the displeasure of hearing. Sleazy was the only descriptor you could think of when he shamelessly raked his eyes down your body, an unsubtle, lecherous action that left you feeling nothing less than violated. "I must have died and gone to human heaven because all I can see in front of me is an angel. Or did you fall to Earth for being very naughty because babe I can help you with that."

You blinked, speechless as he continued with his awful, awful pickup lines.

"Toots," You could feel your soul leave your body. "Where have you been all my life? It's like I've been searching for you everywhere and now here you are at my door in all your human glory. Did it hurt when you fell?" He placed a cold hand on your arm, his unwelcome familiarity just as cloying as his tacky cologne. If this was Eridan you were going to kill yourself. "From your human heaven straight into my arms?"

You liked to think you were an easy going person, easy to get along with, not particularly judgmental or anything, but the wave of loathing that hit you immediately upon meeting the creature before you was palpable. The way he tripped over his V's and W's would be sort of

cute if everything he said wasn't pure trash. God you hoped this wasn't Eridan…. No amount of money was worth tutoring this greasy, slimy boy.

"What'sa matter, kitten, cat got your ton-"

"*Cronus! Oh my GOD!* Are you *really* HARASSIN my TUTOR right now!?" A shrill cry from somewhere behind him echoed. *Oh thank god.* "Get out of HERE!" You saw a much younger looking troll with similar horns and glasses and a purple streak in his hair holding a baseball bat. "Get out! Get Out! *Get OUT!"* He brought the baseball bat across the older troll's back, whacking him repeatedly.

"Ow! Ow! Okay I'm going, Jeez!" He started moving away from the door, but not before turning back to look at you one last time. "Don't worry babe I can take another pounding later tonight, if you know what I mean." He gave you a suggestive wink. You had never felt such a potent urge to punch someone in your life, and that was saying something. And just when you had almost started feeling bad for him. *Almost.*

"*Oh my FUCKIN GOD!* Stop being creepy for *one minute in your coddamn life!* This is why *Nobody FUCKIN LIKES YOU!*" Eridan shouted after him, positively seething. If the other troll cared, he didn't show it. Your charge turned to you, face contrite. "I'm sorry you had to see that whole situation." He huffed, gesturing vaguely in the direction the greasy slimeball went.

You blinked a few times, pushing down your disgust before nodding. "It's okay. I'm ready whenever you are."

He breathed a sigh of relief.

Eridan was simultaneously a bright kid, a huge dumbass, and a monumental racist (not that you understood most of cultural specifics of what he said about the "hemospectrum", but it was impossible not to understand the intent behind his words). You gave him a few test questions to determine where his knowledge-level was, walked him through his homework, and helped him organize his notes in the best possible way to study. The same sort of stuff you would use whenever one of your students would come to you asking for help during office hours.

But despite the rocky beginnings, his elitist demeanor, and the distinct feeling that you were being constantly watched (you could swear you saw Cronus more than once in your periphery, and sometimes a white creature gliding around the halls), you counted the session as a win when he said that you were to meet him again here in his hive the following week, and paid you up-front in cash.

Yes.

Oh *hell* yes.

You were celebrating tonight.

Was it wise to spend almost the entire thing on food? Probably not, but a decently stocked fridge felt so worth it that you couldn't bring yourself to care. You had orange juice. The not-from concentrate kind (Still off-brand though, you weren't a bougie bitch).

You were about to accept a new assignee, but the other TA emailed you saying they wouldn't be able to keep working with one of his lab classes due to a family emergency meaning that the university would rope you into taking on his lab class. That was another at least twenty students for almost no increase in pay. It was in your contract after all.

At least the times wouldn't conflict with your sessions with Eridan so you could still keep that up. So you swallowed down your frustration. Everything was going to be fine. You were gonna make everything work.

"Hey kitten, back for more?" Of course Cronus was the one to greet you when you knocked on the door. "Couldn't resist coming back? Can't say I blame ya chief, you got me feeling all kinds of red." He gave you a lopsided grin, waggling his eyebrows and resting on the door frame, blocking your entry. "I know you're here to help Danny with his math or some shit, but think about how fun it'd be to give me some lessons on your human biology."

His euphemism was very thinly disguised, but given that your degree was literally in microbiology and his wording was ambiguous you figured you could probably con him out of a few hundred bucks to give him an actual lesson in biology. You were about to answer him, but he beat you to the punch.

"And by biology I mean getting down to concupiscent business. You, me, and a bucket." God you hate him. You hate him so much. You hate him to the point of violence. And something very petty and angry rears its head. "Don't worry babe we can take it slow, make a night of it-"

"I'm not here for you." You interrupted him, keeping your face as level and disinterested as possible. "Where is Eridan?"

Cronus faltered for a moment, a scowl twisting his his pretty lips, clicking his tongue he stepped away from the door. "Way to ruin a fucking mood."

And that disgusted petty creature in you couldn't help but mutter, "It was ruined the moment I saw your face."

You crossed the threshold and headed to their dining room where you sat down and prepared for the tutoring session, the greasy little sea-troll following closely behind you.

"I have to admit I wasn't really feeling a pitch way about you, but doll you know I can make it work." He sat next to you, far, far too close. His hand on your shoulder, fingers uncomfortably close to your neck, was the last straw.

You had no idea what sort of stupid troll shit he was talking about, but you wanted no part of it.

"I am already happily in a relationship."

"Sounds to me like you have-"

"*CRONUS! Stop hittin on my tutor!* They ain't interested in your desperate bass!" Ah, your classist little gremlin of a charge to the rescue. He shoved Cronus out of the seat before claiming the spot as his own . "Go away! You're distractin' us from highly *important* business. Not that you could ever understand what *that's* about."

Cronus glared up at him from the floor before standing up and shoving his hands in his pockets. "I hope you know you're at the top of the list of the objectively worst people I know, Eridan. The absolute peak on that monumental list you bulge-blocking lil shit."

"The feelin's mutual."

You elected to stay silent, agreeing with both of them. These two were objectively some of the worst people you had ever met, and if one of them wasn't actively paying a large sum of money up-front to do something you were very good at that was relatively simple, you would never willingly interact with either of these two assholes.

But eventually Cronus conceded and slunk away to a couch in the next room, and though it was facing away from the room you were in, you were pretty sure he was still watching you like a shark… but like a shark that was also a fuckboy.

A Sharkboy.

No… That was stupid.

You're pretty sure Sharkboy was a good, wholesome lad unlike the degenerate in the other room.

A Shuckboy.

Yes, truly a title to encapsulate the awful creature that was Cronus Ampora.

Shuckboy; an unpleasant word for an unpleasant man.

Your sessions with Eridan became a steady weekly gig. Every Thursday at 5:30 in the afternoon you would meet him at his home. He made sure to get you a copy of the syllabus so you had a basic outline of what he would be learning each week in class so that you could

come prepared for what he would likely need. You in turn made sure to download worksheets and diagrams to help him in your sessions.

Eridan was a gross little racist troll, but he was motivated to learn, and once he stopped talking and actually started doing his work and paying attention, he wasn't wholly bad.

You could not say the same for Cronus.

You didn't know if they were siblings or if Cronus was his caretaker, or like just some weird cousin or unrelated adult (highly unlikely given how similar they were down to the dimple on their left cheek when they smiled) who lived with him. But you weren't about to ask. Mostly because you didn't really care what their relationship was, but also because you didn't want to know a single thing more about either of them than necessary. You didn't have time or the emotional energy to get involved with their personal lives. They were just people who paid you (a hefty chunk of money) to do a job.

"You know I'm a bit of a musician." Cronus greeted you when you knocked on the door, long grey arm barring your entrance as he leaned just a little too casually against the doorframe. Lopsided grin showing off his sharp, perfectly even teeth.

"Oh?" You barely managed to feign interest; the sound of acoustic guitar and indie ballads with faux deep lyrics about manic pixie dream girls already hitting your ears.

"Yup, one man band. Do all my own music by myself." He handed you a business card with the URL to his soundcloud and you almost laughed, holding it in except for a single derisive snort. It was laminated, shiny with a headshot of his smug face and a set of headphones. Oh god, if he was a soundcloud rapper you might actually lose it.

A soundcloud rapper with a business card.

"I have quite the following if I do say so myself, but you could always be my number one fan." Cronus waggled his eyebrows.

You honestly wondered if he realized just how ridiculous he was.

Every single goddamn thing you learned about him just increased his mockability. You weren't even sure that was a word but nothing else could fully encompass how much you wanted to needle this fuckboy.

God you and Phil were gonna have a field day with this when you got home. Maybe make a Cronus Music drinking game. Take a shot every time he plays the same tired set of chords that the Lumineers do.

"I can't imagine your number one fan ever meeting you for some reason." You flashed him a dry smile as his eyes widen, gears in his head parsing your meaning then pouting.

“You should really be grateful y’know, Chief.” His lip curled back into a sneer. “I’m offering you a coveted spot in my entourage. Do you know how high on the hemospectrum I am? I’m an Ampora, I have royal blood flowing through my noble veins.”

“And yet you have a business card for your soundcloud account.” You didn’t drop your sharp smile. “Now, are you going to let me in? I have a *real* job to do.”

You stared him down like you would an unruly student, his bright violet eyes locked with yours and you would be damned if you were gonna be the first to blink. After about fifteen seconds he cracked and looked away, gnawing at his lower lip, cheeks dusted a light violet.

“You’re kind of a bi-”

You pushed past him as Eridan strolled into view, and you wondered if this was going to be a routine: Cronus greeting you at the door while Eridan took his sweet time to prepare like some sort of diva…. You really hoped not.

Eridan seemed distracted today, only half listening to your explanation of the Pythagorean theorem, pencil tapping a steady rhythm on the table. Every single time you would say something he would sigh or groan dramatically.

You really didn’t care.

You really did not care in the slightest and you were not planning on asking him what the matter was.

He seemed to have other plans for your session though because about fifteen minutes into it he tossed his pencil down with a huff theatrical enough to be on broadway.

“What’s even the glubbin’ point o’ anyfin?” Eridan moped, slouching in his chair. “No matter what I do they’re always gonna fuckin’ beat me at all of this ship. It isn’t enough that that bulge-muncher Sollux keeps making heart eyes at Fef, but he just has to be so fuckin’ smart too. You’d think that after everything went south with Vris that he and I would be perfect kismesis but that pissblood four horned freak of nature just keeps playin’ so hard to get….”

You did not miss high school in the slightest.

“Oh who am I even kidding,” A perfect little teenage drama queen. “I’m awful and everyone hates me for it, and not even in the good way.” He griped. “Vriska’s probably filling him in on how much of a terrible quad-mate I am as we speak. Bet they’re already waxin’ pitch for each other anyways.”

Wow he just kept on going didn’t he? You thought normal teen drama was bad but you didn’t even understand most of what he was saying. And like hell you were going to ask for clarification, you just wanted to finish your hour and a half session and get back to your stocked fridge… maybe make some home-made butterscotch pudding? Yes.

You had effectively tuned most of his tirade out with the thought of delicious butterscotch.

"Dear Gl'bgolyb what a lowblood power couple that would be…" Sweet, sweet butterscotch. "And I'm all alone… destined to become almost as detestable as Cronus. Soon I bet even my lusus will loathe me like all the others." With just a dusting of cinnamon on top. "Not as much as Cro of course because he's the only person in the entire galaxy who's worse 'n me." That'd really elevate it. "Hey! Are you listening to me?"

"Yes." (No).

He continued to vent about his life as a teenager, and you learned far too much about how much he hates everyone in his class (which was unsurprising). After probably about ten more minutes of his self-pity mopey wank fest he turned to you with a very sharp grin. The kind Cronus usually wore and you'd be lying if you said that it didn't creep you the hell out.

"I'm real sorry that you've been going through so much."

"Well pay up."

You blinked. "What?"

"It isn't every day someone gets the chance to see a proper Ampora mope, so pay up."

This kid had some serious issues. You knew that going into the gig, but somehow he just kept making himself less and less likeable.

"On Earth we call this, where you talk about your feelings to another person, therapy. And here, on Earth, the one who's venting actually has to pay the person they're venting to… so technically, you would owe me money."

Eridan gaped at you, pulling out his weird little bug phone to look up what you'd told him.

"It's okay. You're new to Earth and it was a misunderstanding so I'll let it slide this time, no charge…." He looked remorseful and more than a little lost, and even though you didn't want to admit it, you did kind of feel bad for him. "You're on a strange new planet with new rules and customs to adapt to all while going through highschool. Highschool already sucks, but being around a new species," (That frankly harbored a lot of xenophobia, most schools weren't ready to integrate multi-species classrooms just yet, there were protesters at the embassies, the government was only playing nice to get that upgraded weapon tech, honestly even though you weren't really keeping up with intergalactic politics you wouldn't be surprised if their citizenship on Earth was tenuous at best.) "It's gotta be rough, and I'm sorry that you feel so alone."

He looked at the floor, not meeting your eyes, and you placed a hand on his shoulder. He flinched a bit before leaning into the touch.

"I know a pretty good therapist if you ever need to talk to one though. They specialize in humans there, but I bet they'd be pretty good at helping you with what you're going through. I think it would probably be good for you."

“And,” Fuck, you were really saying this weren’t you, “If you ever really need someone to talk to about stuff, I’ll listen. I’mma be honest, I don’t understand most of what you were saying about personal relationships and stuff, but if… if you *really* need someone and you *really* don’t feel like you have anyone else to turn to, I can do my best to listen.”

The gangly troll seemed to mull it over before mumbling what sounded like “Whatever,” matched with the undertone of indecipherable clicking that seemed to come from his throat.

That… that was a weird sound.

Trolls, for being aliens at least, had pretty human sounding voices. Adults tended to have more vocal fry than humans, but the adolescents you had met (which was admittedly a very small sample size) all sounded very human. But the noise he made was most assuredly, not.

You’d heard that they made odd noises, but you’d never heard it for yourself.

And you had no idea what it meant.

But there was a soft, bubbling whinny as the white creature that you had sworn you saw out of the corner of your eyes manifested from around a corner.

Was… was that a giant seahorse?

“No, I’m fine, thanks.” Eridan responded, that same sort of clicking sound in his throat. The seahorse nodded and left the way it had come, but not before meeting your eyes with its own violet ones.

“Oh heya, Pops.” You could hear Cronus in another room, followed by a stern gurgling nicker, then what sounded like a strained laugh. “Good… Good one, Pops….”

“So,” You said after a moment. “Are you ready to go over the Pythagorean theorem again, Eridan?”

“Yeah, let’s.”

The session continued as normal, Eridan still seeming more subdued than usual… which was disconcerting (given your financial situation… what if he wanted a different tutor?). But as he walked you to the door, he hesitated, shoving his hands into his pockets.

He was making that weird sort of clicking sound again in his throat, looking over to the side. “I learned a lot today…. Same time next week.”

You breathed a sigh of relief and nodded. “Same time next week.”

The trip home had been uneventful. There were some lab reports you still had to grade tonight if you wanted to keep ahead of the curve. Grading things last minute was definitely not something you wanted to do. But other than that, you really didn't have much in the way of responsibilities for the rest of the night; Your actual research had already been written up, neatly charted in your excel spreadsheets, formulas already calculating the results.

So you kicked off your pants and put on some pajamas, making sure to empty your pockets onto your desk before putting your clothes in the hamper.

Tonight was date night, and you still had another hour before Phil finished his shift.

You sat down at your desk and-

Oh.

You still had Cronus' goofy looking business card.

The eyes on his headshot seemed to follow you no matter how you turned the card… and you couldn't help but wonder if he had paid someone to design this. The longer you looked at it the more uncomfortable it made you.

You punched the url into your computer, and immediately shoved the business card into one of the drawers so it wouldn't keep staring at you. His soundcloud page was… not bad. Surprisingly the avatar was just a few violet squiggly lines on a white backdrop just like the symbol he wore on his shirt. The banner was also pretty tasteful, violet and plum on black. So far so good.

Then you saw the song titles.

Of course.

Lunar Lust, Daytime Hookup, You Can Hold My Hand (And My Bulge), Sexual Solicitations, Sluts. He had a song called Sluts.

You selected the most benign song you could find; Breakfast Nook.

Probably still dirty knowing just who wrote it, but maybe it would be about like… finding your true love over mutual love of french toast or some shit. The beat started out nicely…. Actually it was pretty good. You expected a lot more acoustic guitar, not the buzzing of electronica, but compositionally; it was a pretty good listen.

Cronus had a surprisingly good singing voice, but-

Nope.

Nope. Nope. Nope.

That was some alien sex shit he was singing about. You may not have known all of what the words meant, but that was hands down one of the raunchiest songs you had ever listened to.

It was like a trainwreck that you couldn't stop yourself from watching… but with your ears. Phil was gonna have a field trip with this.

And he did.

You both did.

It was honestly one of the funnest date nights you had had in a while; ribbing on the weird dubstep sex songs over skype.

And you definitely didn't feel lonely at all when you hung up… (not even a little).

Much to your chagrin, Cronus was indeed the one to greet you for each session. Like clockwork he was there, sometimes you barely got to finish the first knock before the door would open like he was waiting on the doorstep for you to arrive. In fact, you're pretty sure sometimes you saw his face pressed up against the window when you pulled into their massive circular driveway.

Today was no different, stupid unlit cigarette hanging between his lips, he greeted you with his usual, "Didn't get enough last week, kitten?"

"This is simply business, Cronus. I'm here because I am being paid to be here at a specific time each week for a service rendered. AKA a *job.*" You barely attempted to hide your annoyance with him anymore. "Not that you would know what that is. Somehow I can't imagine you ever putting effort into anything other than your appearance."

He sneered at you, showing off those shark teeth of his. "Glad you noticed my good looks, and I'll have you know that I do have a job: Making bomb-ass music that's gonna be at the top of the billboard charts soon."

"I never stated that you looked good, only that you very obviously put effort into your appearance. Skinny jeans, t-shirt one size too small, slicked back hair… and you know you're supposed to actually light the cigarette, right? You're certainly emulating two douchey human fashion trends at once… and for all of that effort, when was the last time someone genuinely wanted to be around you?" You sniped back, and almost felt bad when his face fell. That was a new reaction... usually for some reason he would dig into the insults, but this was different.

He pursed his lips, pinched the bridge of his nose then looked back to you.

"Y'know, chief, you've got quite the quick tongue." His laid back flirty smile returned just as quickly as it had left. "I wonder what you could do with it when you aren't busy spitting barbs."

Your own expression soured somewhat. "And I wonder what could happen with yours if you just stopped talking for once." You regretted it the moment it left your mouth. That was…

suboptimally worded and judging from the violet flush on his cheeks he'd heard the worst interpretation of it too.

His fins fluttered, adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. Mouth slightly ajar, like a fish out of water, moving as he worked to find words.

"That was not a proposition. I am in a happily committed relationship." You amended. You were a researcher in the STEM field, you didn't need to be good at off the cuff jabs for goodness sake. Were you usually? Yes. But sometimes… Sometimes you weren't, and the fact that the universe sought to punish you when you weren't was just another thing that ticked you off.

"Just uh…. Just the one?" Cronus' shoe scuffed at the floor.

Oh no.

Oh no.

You did not like the direction this was heading.

"That's all most humans have at one time." You responded, then awkwardly amended. "There are of course exceptions to the norm, but humans by and large are relatively monogamous creatures. And before you ask, no I am not one of the exceptions in that respect, I am *happy* with Phil."

"You know you're being very *ethnocentric.* It's real closed minded of you to completely refuse to explore a different culture, kitten." He chewed on the butt of his cigarette, still unlit. "I honestly expected better from you since you're supposed to be educated and all. You might as well be like the rest of those xenophobes out there. Such a stuck-up fuckin' prude."

You just rolled your eyes. "I see someone's been using their word a day calendar… though I'm not sure you understand the meaning of the words you speak. Trying to guilt me into fucking you by twisting fancy, wokewashed buzzwords…. You really are nothing more than a pitiful little fuckboy, aren't you."

His eyes widened, jaw going slack, fins drooping, cigarette falling to the ground. His face journey was something to behold as his expressions shifted from shocked to nervous to something you couldn't quite place. "You… pity me?" His voice was very small.

"No. Pity requires a modicum of sympathy for you, of which I have none."

He looked mildly perturbed, then quite upset. "Wow… I get that you're basically pitch as fucking obsidian for me and shit but that was a fucking low blow even for you. Don't say flushed shit if you don't mean it. You really are one frigid candyblood chute–"

You literally could not care less about the nonsense spewing from his stupid fuckboy mouth. You unsubtly peered into the house behind him trying to catch some sign that Eridan would be coming to greet you soon.

“Cronus are you going to let me in or not?” You interrupted upon not seeing the younger troll.

“What do I get if I do?” That sleazy look in his eye returned as he looked you up and down.

“Well I won’t flog your desperate bass for scarin’ away another one of my tutors, is that sufficient enough for you, you repulsive sack of refuse?” Eridan’s voice came from behind Cronus. He looked positively livid.

“Was done here anyway….” Cronus took a deep breath before skulking away to the couch.

“I was on a grype call that ran longer than expected. I trust you were able to handle yourself with Cro?” It wasn’t an apology, but he did look mildly contrite.

You gave a noncommittal shrug and a sigh. You were getting pretty sick of it if you were being honest. You couldn’t exactly quit but if this was gonna be a regular thing….

“I’ll pay you time and a half to not leave and make me find another tutor.” Eridan muttered, looking uncharacteristically nervous. “You’re, dare I say, competent at your job and I don’t want to go through the tedious process of hirin’ someone else. You’re the first one Cronus hasn’t scared away after two sessions.”

"It's not like I need a lot of tutorin’,” He amended, “I’m pretty glubbin intelligent, but I can’t keep losing to a fuckin’ mustardblood bulge-munching delinquent. And if I have to keep starting over with different tutors again there’s no way I’ll be able to keep up with that bipolar bilge spill-slurping miscreant. And if I can’t keep up with him then can we even truly be full fledged kismesises?”

One and a half times what you were currently making with him…. Yeah you could keep this up. Sure, being stuck with Cronus still sucked but you could deal with it for that kind of money. “You’ve got yourself a deal, Eridan.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. “Now that we’ve got that all sorted out….”

He led you to the lavish dining room where your session went about as well as any of them did.

Your bank account was looking… relatively healthy for once. You were still poor of course, but you had just enough in your savings account that you could visit Phil this month. It was still a little tentative, but you’d decided on a when (Halloween weekend, you were pretty sure you’d be able to get a few days off for it) and a where, and you couldn’t be more excited. It would only be for a few days, you couldn’t afford more than that. You’d planned on driving, it’d be a little cheaper that way even if you’d be a little more tired.

Your fridge was full, your students were busy creating their own lab-work which took a load off of your shoulders, and your lessons with Eridan were going really well.

Your luck was finally starting to turn around. Life was… good. Better than it had been in a long time.

Until on a brisk Wednesday morning, your car broke down on the way to work.

A brief tow (thank you AAA), call to your department head, a mental breakdown and almost a grand down the toilet later, you were all set.

But the trip….

Phil….

Would have to wait. Not forever, you told yourself over and over again (but long enough).

You wiped your eyes as you parked outside Eridan's lavish manor taking a moment to steady yourself.

You knocked on the door, then knocked again when no one answered after almost a minute. The door finally opened to Cronus (Of course the universe would not grant you reprieve). Today he was wearing sunglasses, face unusually pale and underneath the cloyingly thick scent of axe….

He absolutely reeked of alcohol.

"Hey, kitten back for more?" His words were stilted but not slurred…. You grinned.

That bitch was hung the fuck over.

"Of course. How *are* you, Cronus?" You said just a bit too loud, watching him wince, face scrunching up from his hangover.

It was petty, it was mean, but god it felt so good to give him a little bit of hell. Take out just a tiny bit of the anger and frustration you'd been feeling all week.

"Doing just fine. Never better." He flashed you what he thought must be a very charming smile, but it was strained, and even with the sunglasses blocking your view, you were positive that it didn't reach his eyes.

"So happy to hear that," And it wasn't like he didn't deserve every scrap of hostility of directed at him. He was a complete jackass. "Because I was starting to worry that maybe you were nursing a hangover. Of course you're not though… that usually comes with that queasiness in your gut. Disgusting taste in your dry mouth." You watched giddily as his jaw clenched. "And such an *awful* headache –"

"Yup… definitely not feeling like that at all, chief, but could we use our inside voices? Unless human lusii don't teach basic fuckin' etiquette."

"I have no idea what you mean, Cronus." You replied as sickeningly sweet as you could. "What's an inside voice?"

“Jeegus, kitten, it’s when you keep your voice nice and low out a’ respect for the people forced to be around you.”

“You really do look quite *awful* today, are you sure you’re feeling alright?” You lowered your voice a smidge, batting your eyelashes.

Eridan came sweeping down the hall in his cape and gave a disgusted look. “Yes, yes, you two hate each other, but keep it fuckin’ PG I *am* still a minor, and I really don’t want to see whatever repugnant hateful acts your ugly asses come up with.”

“Minor nuisance more like.” Cronus sneered back at him.

The younger troll just gave him a scathing look and he backed down muttering something about not needing to deal with this shit today.

“Hate’s kind of a strong word…” You rubbed the back of your neck self-consciously. It wasn’t that it wasn’t a correct assessment of your feelings, but hearing out loud made you feel a little bit... bad. “Anyways, you guys should be starting quadratic equations soon, right?”

He nodded. “We’re supposed to start them tomorrow, so I want to go over them tonight so I can impress everyone.”

"Alrighty then, let’s get started.” You pulled out a small dry erase board and some markers.

"Actually,” Eridan plucked at his scarf, painted violet nails digging into the fabric as he looked over his shoulder to make sure Cronus wasn’t still skulking around. “I’ve been thinkin’ a lot about what you said before about… about the therapy thing. I… think I want to give it a try. It would be nice to talk to someone without a ton of judgment…. And I want the number of the therapist you recommended.”

“Yeah absolutely, of course, dude.” You pulled out your phone and searched for the contact number. “Here, I’ll email it to you.”

His voice was small as he replied with a quick, unexpected, “Thanks.”

“No problem at all. Mental health is important, and I think everyone could benefit from a bit of therapy. There’s no shame in it.” You gave him a slight smile which he brushed off, but you couldn’t be annoyed at him for it (even if you were in an abysmal mood). “And I know it probably doesn’t mean much because I’m just your math tutor, but I’m proud of you for taking care of yourself."

He puffed out his cheek like he was annoyed, but you could see something dancing behind his dark grey eyes, and you idly wondered if they would become that (lovely) shade of violet that Cronus’ were or if they would always remain the color they were now. You really didn’t know much about troll biology….

First contact had happened after you had already started college. And zoology hadn’t been your thing so much as mycology and to a lesser extent botany. But maybe if you were going

to keep tutoring a troll you should learn a little more about them.

Was a thought you had… and a thought you promptly forgot about when the lesson began once more.`

Of course you were working Halloween (not that you had anything interesting or pressing to do); both jobs, and you'd spent nearly twenty dollars on candy for your students because your professors used to do that for you, and it always made your day so returning the favor for your students was a nonissue (and there was no one who appreciated sugar more than college students)… even though you were supposed to be spending the day with Phil at Cedar Point…. But life liked to kick you down (kind of a lot)….

But it was fine. You had a skype date planned for tomorrow because one of his friends had invited him to a party for tonight. And there was a giant pumpkin festival just a half hour drive away tonight which would be fun.

What you wouldn't give for some land to grow your own pumpkins. Just a couple plants, and if you tended it well enough maybe you could enter one of those contests one day…. The thought of a pumpkin weighing over a ton was just so enrapturing. So weighed down by its own weight it would sag like a fat cat relaxing in the sunlight but with the hardness of the fibrous gourd it was.

How magical.

How resplendent.

How you yearned to grow one of your own.

But those dreams would have to wait… you liked to think that it would only be a few years, but you definitely worried that you might never (but you really didn't like to go down that thoughtpath).

Eridan's hive was decorated with the signs of fall, massive pumpkins (you felt a twinge of jealousy) carved into fantastic sculptures depicting what you supposed where the gruesome creatures feared by trolls. It was spectacular to behold.

God you hated being poor so much….

You felt so underwhelming in your witch hat and garlands of dried fallen leaves pinned to an old shawl. You liked to think you looked like an autumnal witch, but you weren't under any illusions about how your costume would probably compare to Eridan's.

Much to your surprise, Eridan was the one to greet you at the door instead of Cronus, which was a welcome reprieve from that smarmy, conniving, desperate asshole. And… wow, you were kind of expecting him to dress up like Dracula, given that his normal outfit already included a cape and he was a dramatic little bastard…. But you did not even in your wildest

dreams expect him to be wearing an embroidered emerald green and gold dress and a red wig plaited in a long braid.

Was… was he Princess Fiona? From Shrek?

“Princess Fiona?” You asked.

He fidgeted a little nervously, but replied haughtily, “Of course.”

“Nice! That’s a bitchin dress dude, you look great.” He relaxed a little, flushing a light lavender.

“I know,” Eridan said quickly. “But it’s good of you to notice.”

“Is that crushed velvet?” You followed him to the dining room, and couldn’t help but notice the small smile on his lips.

“Why yes it is. I didn’t realize you had such exquisite taste in finery. No offense, you may be an academic, but I always took you for a bit of a peas– You never seemed the type to be into fashion… you dress rather plainly.”

Eridan had started therapy recently, and he seemed to be trying harder to watch what he said about other people which was also a very pleasant change of pace.

You set up at the table, getting yourselves situated when you heard the distinctive clicking of heels on polished stone floor, and you made the mistake of turning around.

Your mouth immediately went dry.

Oh.

Oh no.

Your blinked, once, twice, but no... Cronus was still very much there, lopsided grin on his face. Dressed like the whore he was (which wasn’t quite meant as an insult given that he really was dressed in an actual whoremongering uniform). Skintight strapless one-piece, fishnet stockings, a headband with two long ears sticking up on top, and a bow for a choker.

“What’sa matter, kitten, bunny got your tongue?” He asked very slowly and deliberately and you realized you had been staring way too long.

“Cronus, go be a slut somewhere else.” Eridan sneered, but the older troll just chuckled and gave you a wink (was he wearing sparkly eye shadow??).

“Don’t worry, Chief, I’ll be out of your weird orange wig in no time. I do have a party to go to in a little while, after all.” He walked over to the couch and your wicked, treacherous eyes couldn’t help but catch on the little cottontail right at his tailbone (and definitely did not look any lower, no sir, you definitely did not check him out). Cronus perched on the back of the sofa, grinning at you like the evil son of a bitch he was. “Unless of course I find something *better to do*.”

Eridan made a little sound of disgust, “Your behavior is nothin’ short of appallin’,” He rummaged through his papers and sighed, "Crap I forgot my worksheet upstairs. I’ll be right back.” He got up and left the room, leaving you very, very much alone with that despicable, sinful asshat in the playboy bunny suit that you were desperately doing your best to ignore as you stared blankly at the binder in front of you.

You heard the clicking of his heels getting closer until his hand was on your shoulder, picking at one of the leaves on your shawl, and you almost jumped out of your skin. “This costume looks good on you, but I bet it’d look even better on my floor.”

You grit your jaw and shrugged him off, “You’re awful quiet tonight, kitten.”

“Sorry, just thinking about how wonderful my boyfriend is.” You replied, finally turning to look at him and give him one of your unimpressed faces.

(Which may not have been one of your better ideas).

You could feel your cheeks heating up as you stared up at him, trying very hard not to think about how tall he was or how close he was or how the fishnets accentuated his– … well… a lot of things. You were doing your best to keep your mind blank.

He went to speak again but you stood up abruptly, “Excuse me, I have a non-communicable human disease, and I have to use your bathroom.” You hurried over to the closest one and locked yourself in.

You splashed some cold water over your face and you met your own gaze in the mirror.

Oh no.

Oh no… he’s hot.

You could hear Squidward wailing the words in your head.

He was hot, and your last date with Phil had been interrupted by his grandmother, and that had ruined the mood, and you were still very horny, and you’d been so mad you just threw yourself into work, and.. and….

Goddamn you were trying very, very hard not to imagine what Cronus would look like naked. After all trolls were very, very humanoid down to the bipedal nature. Sure they had horns and different blood colors but overall a troll silhouette wasn’t that different from a humans…. And the slope of his abdomen was interesting and you hadn’t really seen much of a – No.

No you were not going to think about this.

You were in a committed relationship, and Cronus was the least desirable person you knew… even if he looked good when he tried. His personality was still trash. He was still the same Cronus you knew and loathed.

He was still the asshat who insulted you every single time you turned him down.

And wouldn't stop when you told him you weren't interested.

And he probably had multiple STDs.

Yes. He was definitely disease ridden and awful.

You nodded to yourself in the mirror.

You could do this.

You opened the door and went out to see Cronus perched on the sofa, legs crossed at the ankle as he watched you like a hawk. "You certainly look a little *flustered,* don't you, kitten?"

"And you look like a whore." You bit back, but he just winked.

"Thank you," He replied. "But I really think I'm more of a slut. If I was a whore, I'd be making you pay me to ride my bulge, but I'm offering it for free."

There he was.

There that disgusting shuckboy was.

Despite his lewd hand gesture and the subtle pat on his lap like he expected you to sit there, you really weren't feeling it.

He had successfully killed that awful swirling in the pit of your stomach (which, to set the record straight, definitely wasn't even there to begin with).

You rolled your eyes and walked past him without a second glance (you were pretty proud of yourself for that).

"Jeegus, kitten, don't be such a prude. Do you know how many people would die to be in a kismessitude with me? I'm practically top of the hemospectrum. There are literally two other trolls in the whole goddamn universe higher than me."

You turned to look at him; He was practically glowering at you. "Cranky 'cuz you're horny, ain't ya, Cronus?" You couldn't help the shit eating grin creeping over your face. "If you're so high up, what are you doing hitting on some lowly peasant academic? I'm not even your *species*."

He blushed. "I just… I just feel sorry for you. Stuck in some boring human romance when you could be with actual royalty…. You're cute and I'm down. I'm as good as you're ever gonna get, toots."

"Sorry, I'm not into spoiled, bratty subs." You turned and sat back down before you could break your expression, but not before you caught a glimpse of the absolutely offended face he made.

God that was satisfying.

You could hear him sputtering behind you, but you refused to turn and look at him again and Eridan had just settled himself back down at the table.

The session went about as well as normal, and for every right answer he got you gave Eridan a piece of candy which probably weren't up to his high society rich standards, but he seemed pleased nonetheless.

Cronus had moped on the sofa, draping himself over the back like a bereft harlot for a good half of the session before loudly declaring he was going to a party where someone would "understand exactly what to do with this hot piece of ass" (smacking his own on his way out in emphasis).

Overall, it was certainly not the worst time you could have had… probably.

And you definitely did not think about how the black material of Cronus' suit hugged his skin, or the way the heels he wore accentuated his ass, and your dreams that night were definitely just about the giant pumpkins you had gone to view afterward and definitely did not involve a horny fuckboy on his knees.

Nope.

Not.

At.

All.

The department was adding a new student to the grad program in the spring, they were in the interview process right now. You could hear the questions in the other room as you tidied up your office and prepared to head out for the day.

It was incredibly tempting to stay just a little bit late to corner them after the interview and get to know them because honestly the interview process for the department was kind of a joke. It was way too small for them to turn down any competent applicants (and even some incompetent ones, but those usually just flunked out of the program). But you didn't want to be late for your tutoring session with Eridan. You'd been late last week because you'd been dreading seeing Cronus after Halloween….

You weren't prepared to do the same this week… you really couldn't afford to lose that tutoring position.

So with a heavy heart you locked up and gave one last look at the next door and what was no doubt an excellent interview from the way the department head was laughing. You could always use a good funnyman in the crew. The last one had been Teddy before he'd transferred out west to study the recent surge of Amanita phalloides on the pacific coast (with

the surge of amateur mushroom enthusiasts, poisonings were becoming a serious problem… there was a reason it was called the death cap).

You'd done your best to fill the void and bring levity, but there was only so much you could lift with your deadpan delivery of jokes which, although funny, tended to be a much drier sense of humor than Teddy had specialized in.

Although everyone seemed to enjoy your cheesy pickup lines:

"Is your name Amanita Virosa? Because Angel you are killing me."

"I must have eaten a fly agaric because surely someone so beautiful can only exist in my dreams."

(Which did not go over well when you tried it at some of the local bars… Or even the mushroom festivals you'd gone to….)

You threw your bag into the passenger seat and drove the twenty minutes to Eridan's hive.

The pumpkins that had been carved for Halloween no longer decorated his yard, but the few that had been left in tact still rested where they had the previous few weeks.

You wondered if he had a gardener….

You wondered if he was looking to hire another gardener.

The door opened as you approached, Cronus giving you his characteristic sharky grin. Did he just… not understand the word no? Was that some sort of troll thing?

"Cronus." You gave him a curt nod, noticing that as he blocked the doorway, one of his hands was conspicuously placed behind his back.

"Kitten," He began his customary greeting, "Still can't keep yourself away, eh? Drawn to the old Ampora charm." He waggled his eyebrows and you grimaced. "I actually got something for you."

"If it's your dick, I'm not interested." You replied flatly.

But he just kept up his lazy little nasty smile with too much teeth as he pulled out a bouquet of flowers and held them out.

You froze for a moment as he looked at you expectantly.

It was….

"These're for you."

You reached out a tentative hand, taking the bouquet, examining the flowers very carefully. White lilies of the valley and bloodroot surrounded light pink oleanders and foxglove and in the middle violet larkspur and monkshood.

“Digitalis, Delphinium, Aconitum, Sanduinaria canadensis….” You listed their names, and though you knew it was a bad idea, you couldn’t resist ghosting your finger along the purple caps of the monkshood wondering if your finger would break out in itchy hives just from contact. People said that it would happen if you touched ghost peppers but it never did… But these…. “If I didn’t know better I’d think you were trying to kill me.”

You saw that sharky grin widen even further.

"Did you put much thought into this?” You asked, but given the deadly arrangement in your hands, it was impossible that he hadn’t put thought into it. He must have gone to the city to get them all. They were out of season, and dangerous enough that most florists refused to carry more than the lillies of the valley… and if they did creating a bouquet of them specifically like this… nah. He would have had to find a specialty shop. You legitimately had to wonder if he was trying to kill you with this.

“’Course I put thought into it, kitten. Honestly that you’d imply otherwise is offensive.”

“Of course. How could I have thought otherwise…” You smiled in turn and met his eyes, “Purity, duplicity, fortune, toxic as hell… It’s almost as though you tried to have the florist distill your essence into a bouquet.”

He let out an incredulous laugh looking wickedly delighted. “Ain’t nothing pure about me, sweetheart.”

You rolled your eyes at the pet name… and here you thought you couldn’t hate one more than kitten. "Yes I’m sure your DM’s are very full with potential suitors who definitely aren’t bots or catfishers.”

“They are actually. I have a very active romantic life. Bitches are practically throwing themselves at me wherever I go.” He gave you a smug grin. “But you know my little black book always has room for my number one fan.”

You’re pretty sure your eyes might roll out of their sockets from how much you were rolling your eyes… but he had given you a nice gift so you cut him a little slack. Before you could respond, Eridan pushed Cronus out of the way and beckoned you in.

The older troll glared daggers at him but he paid him no mind. “Sorry for him… you know how he is.”

"Nothing to apologize for.” You responded quickly, looking at the bouquet in your hand.

You couldn’t help but glance over at them during the session. They really were quite lovely specimens…. And you… had never really received flowers before. At least not in this sort of context.

You’d gotten them when you achieved things… like graduating, or helping secure a grant, or doing well on a performance in high school. You’d never gotten flowers in a romantic or even a “just cause” context…. And you didn’t quite know how to feel about it.

He'd taken the time to research flowers or at least dictate to a florist exactly what he was looking for and… fuck.

You'd just been mean to him about it.

When your session had ended, you took a moment to seek out Cronus. He sat on one of the porch steps, chewing on the butt of his cigarette and staring at your beat up old sedan. He looked up at you as you approached and gave you his signature lopsided smile.

"I…" You began, scratching the back of your neck. Why was this so hard? "Uh… Thanks for the flowers. They were a very thoughtful gift and I appreciate it very much." You mumbled out, doing your best not to look at him.

He snorted. "Shit… you mean you don't hate them?"

Wha-

"Of course I don't hate them. They're beautiful."

"Yeah but they're completely useless." He looked at you with an odd mix of disbelief and curiosity.

You couldn't help the mischievous smile forming on your lips. "Maybe in the wrong hands."

You could see his pupils dilate and a violet flush tint his cheeks in the light pouring out from the windows. His jaw worked silently as though he wanted to say something, but you were already walking past him.

You stopped for a second to awkwardly pat his head before opening the car door. "Thanks again."

Should you have put them in water? Well that was one of the options you had when you got back to your apartment. But they would wilt and die relatively quickly.

So like any ridiculously sentimental person, you hung them upside-down above your desk, being careful to wrap a cheesecloth (that would now be rendered too poisonous to use on food) around the blooms to minimize the risk of contaminating your workspace and accidentally ingesting any,

You took on last look at them as you got into bed resolving not to tell Phil about them. It wasn't like you were trying to hide the fact that another man had given you flowers and you'd kept them… but Phil could get a little jealous. And it's not like you were doing anything wrong in keeping them but maybe…. Maybe it was just better if you kept it to yourself.

And as you turned off the light, you couldn't help the small smile playing on your lips.

Reaching an Understanding

Chapter Summary

Eridan decides to throw a human style Christmas party to one-up his new nemesis, and you do your absolute best to get through it with as minimal contact with Cronus as possible.

Chapter Notes

Wow this took forever to finish... but it's about three times the length of the first chapter so I hope you all enjoy it. And it's perfectly timed for the holidays so I guess that worked out pretty well haha.

After writing this I decided that I would never make a chapter this long again so I'm splitting chapter 3 into 3 smaller chapters that should be out much more quickly than just one massive chunk. This clocks in at a little over 27k words so I'm pretty proud of it.

I also wrote up a little smutty piece to go with the fic and posted that as a separate story but in the same series as this one

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Your parents had decided to spend the holidays with your brother who was stationed overseas…. You were happy for them. Really you were. And Phil would be spending them with his family as well, which was just grand, and he'd invited you out to Minne-fucking-sota to celebrate with them. You were definitely just happy and not at all bitter about the whole thing and the fact that you had just had to use almost all of your savings to fix up your stupid car and that you were going to spend yours very, very alone.

So when Eridan told you that he would be having a Christmas party you were more than a little surprised. First that trolls celebrated Christmas at all, second that he was branching out and doing something out of his comfort zone, and third that he would invite you of all people. You had felt something shift in your relationship after he started actually going to therapy, something almost personal, but you weren't friends. Not really. He was just a kid who needed guidance and a nudge (repeated shoves) in the right direction.

You were just nonthreatening and in a position of just enough power and just enough informality that he seemed to respect you enough to sometimes listen to your advice.

The party had been an idea from his therapist, but it was something that he seemed genuinely excited to do; To one-up his brand new nemesis, of course. “It’ll be perfect! John’ll be humiliated when my party blows his stupid, puny one out of the water!” It seemed he had gotten over the troll boy who he’d been trying to build a rivalry with.

And honestly, you were pretty proud of him for putting himself out there like that. You knew he had a lot of problems maintaining his friendships because of his horrendous personality. This would be a chance to maybe make things right and show that he wasn’t a massive prick all the time… even if his motivation of spite and rivalry weren’t really in the Christmas spirit.

He was even tactful enough not to complain when you had just given him a tin full of gingerbread dinosaurs as an early gift the week after the invite. You didn’t have a lot in the way of money or time to do much more than that.

Eridan could barely focus on his homework, changing the subject constantly to talk about his party, and of course, John. You were pretty sure he had a crush on his human classmate, but you had no intention of asking him about it. Troll romance was weird, and you still couldn’t quite get the whole quadrants thing…. You barely had enough time for one partner let alone four.

“He’s just so positive all time, and everyone just loves him sooo much. It’s so frustratin.” Eridan waved his pencil around animatedly. “And his human dad always bakes him stupid saccharine confections, and is going to have ‘eggnog’ at his party. Well I *too* can have ‘eggnog’ at my party, and it’ll be better than his because I will have *professionals* make it. Who needs a human dad when you have money?” He gave a nasty little fishy smile that was just a little too mean to be comforting. “It will be so much cooler than his party, and I’m going to invite all of the coolest people I know. I’ll even invite *The* Marvus Xoloto that’ll show *him* who’s the bigger fish.” The name was vaguely familiar.

“That’s very nice, Eridan. I’m glad you’re so passionate about your rivalry, but we still gotta make sure you finish up your homework.” You patiently replied.

He just groaned in response.

“Can’t you just do it for me or somefin?”

“Nope.” You made the mistake of looking up, catching sight of Cronus watching you both from the sofa in the other room. He smirked at you, and you rolled your eyes, turning back to look at the almost blank sheet of paper. “C’mon, these proofs aren’t going to do themselves.”

But it was almost useless as your pupil just stared off into space, drumming his fingers on the table with a determined little smile on his face.

“I can think of a couple things I wouldn’t mind watching do themselves.” Cronus said from his position on the couch. You glared at him. “If you know what-”

“Everyone knows what you mean, Cronus. You’re as subtle as a cannon.”

He just grinned, sharp teeth gleaming in the light. “I’ll show you my cannon anytime, kitten.”

You're pretty sure you might actually end up murdering him.

"Don't you have like… actual things to do? Like anywhere else? Ever?"

"And miss this view?" He gave you an overly suggestive wink. "You coming to the Crispmas party, doll? It's not just gonna be Danny-boy and his wiggler friends. There's gonna be other adults and 'booze' and stuff. It'll be fun. Some of my other friends'll be there too."

You had to admit it did sound a lot better than sitting alone in your apartment getting sad drunk and crying yourself to sleep to the backdrop of hallmark movies.

"You could even bring your boyfriend that you talk about so much." That sent a pang through your chest that you did your best to ignore. "Maybe even have a threesome because you know I'm down for that. Like not even just a little down, like super down. Damn, babe, that sounds hot. You've convinced me. You, me, him, let's make a fucking Cronus sandwich. Holy shit that's a good line, I gotta write that down. That's so going into my next song."

He hopped over the couch to the table to snag a pencil and piece of stationary, writing his lyrical masterpiece down.

"That's going to be a hard pass. Phil and I are not looking for a unicorn and if we were you definitely would not meet the criteria." You snorted, looking over to see Eridan just doodling a picture of him and who you guessed was John, kissing under some mistletoe but also somehow looking incredibly mad while doing it. God was romance the only thing this entire household thought about?

"I guess that's what a guy gets for trying to be inclusive and sex positive in this world." Cronus pouted. "I go ahead and put myself out there over and over again and everyone just steps all over my poor little pump biscuits. Every single time…. And all I ever want to do is be sensitive and listen and write poetry about them. But no, no one wants a sweet, nice guy." He hurled himself dramatically onto the couch. "It's like I have to broken to get some attention," (You were at least ninety five percent sure at least *part* of him was broken). "No one understands the soul of a tortured artist. Being deep is hard. It's hard and nobody understands."

"You're not deep, you're just desperate. Get over yourself."

You're pretty sure you heard him mutter, *"no one understands*" into one of the many nautically themed couch pillows, but he had stopped bothering you, and it was clear that Eridan was not in the right head space for proofs. Maybe it would be best if you were to cut the session short…. You had a lot of lab journals to grade anyway.

But as you stood up, Eridan turned to you, a thoughtful look on his face as though doing some sort of mental calculation. He wore his heart on his sleeve, and his internal monologues were pretty easy to decipher just by watching his face. Finally he came to rest at a pout, cheeks sort of puffed out while he looked to the side, his hands clenching and unclenching. "Teach me how to make those cookies… so I can rub John's stupid face in how insurmountably talented I am."

It was worded as a command, but the way his voice cracked and how he wouldn't meet your eyes told you it was very much a question. A very important question and you were faced with a Decision. He wasn't your responsibility and you had a lot of work to get done, but he was actively working on bettering himself, and he wanted your help.

So you gave him a tired smile and nodded.

"I absolutely can if you say please."

He said it so quickly and quietly that you would have missed it if you weren't listening for it. It was good enough for now.

"Do you have ingredients for it?" He nodded, bringing you over to the overly large kitchen and gesturing around him. "Do you know where they are?"

At that he frowned. "I ain't ever needed to know," His tone haughty.

"Alright then," You looked around, rummaging through cabinets until you found some measuring tools and mixing bowls. Flour, sugar, salt, some spices labeled in a language you couldn't read but smelled like cinnamon and nutmeg. "Do you know if you have molasses and baking soda?"

After a lot of searching you both managed to find all of the ingredients for a few things; Two very simple cookies for a beginner gingerbread and snickerdoodles, and a liquor… pantry? (It was much more than just a cabinet and was alarmingly well stocked). You started with the gingerbread since it would need to rest in the fridge for a bit before it could be rolled out and shaped.

It was mostly you doing the work, Eridan acting as the sous chef, prepping the ingredients and listening intently as you explained what would be going on chemically (because you couldn't resist giving him a breakdown as to how everything would bind together to create something magically delicious and seemingly more than the raw sum of its parts). Occasionally he would make a snide, impolite comment but you would just stop and look at him until he caved and apologized. Therapy really was working wonders on this little gremlin.

Once the dough for the gingerbread had come together and you'd put it in the fridge, you started on the snickerdoodles, having him make the sugar and spice mixture for the coating.

"This recipe is one of the best I've got… It's actually a pretty good anyday cookie, not just for holidays." You gave him a cocky grin. "Not to brag, but whenever I'd make these for my friends I'd need to make at least two batches because without a doubt one of my friends would eat an entire batch himself."

You hadn't seen him since he'd decided to live in a bus with his girlfriend off the grid, roaming wherever their hearts led them. Not tied down with jobs or rent or anything. You thought it was a nice idea, far too idealistic to work though and when you'd brought up the subject of making sure they fed themselves and were able to get mail or anything they'd

brushed you off. But they hadn't called you up asking for money so maybe things were working out for them…. Neither of them had answered your messages in months though.

You swallowed down the lump in your throat. There was no time to be sad, it was fun winter solstice celebration time and you had a lot to do, and Eridan was starting to complain about the flour splotches on his new lavender apron and if you didn't hold it together….

"What'cha makin, Chief?" Cronus loomed over you with that stupid punchable smirk on his face. And loomed was the only word you could aptly describe it as, penned between him and the counter you were acutely aware of just how much taller that alien shuckboy was than you.

It wasn't fair. It really wasn't. Whatever higher power out there that decided that they were going to make trolls taller than humans then force you to interact with the worst of them should honestly just be stripped of their powers. Because they were stupid and made cruel decisions.

"Cronus in the spirit of the holidays I'm going to give you a warning: If you sneak up on me again I *will* beat you half to death with this spoon."

"Haha then what?" He winked.

"Go be gross somewhere else!" Eridan smacked him with the rolling pin. "'fore I stab you, and I know where exactly to make it hurt."

"I ain't even done anything yet." The older troll pouted, taking a seat on the kitchen island. "Can't blame a guy for being hungry, maybe I'm just waiting for you guys to finish so I can make somethin' for dinner. Ain't nothing creepy or gross about that."

"Fine, but if you're going to wait in here breathing down our necks, you're gonna help out." You shot Cronus a look over your shoulder.

He rolled his eyes. "Nyeh, fine. Where do you need me, chief?"

"In the sink so you can wash those hands of yours. After that, bring those baking sheets over here."

By the time you took the last tray of cookies out of the oven, you were pretty tired… you'd been there three hours longer than you had expected. The sky outside was dark, the edges of the windows frosted over, the bickering between the two trolls behind you had failed to peter off even once they started stuffing their mouths full of gingerbread. Or rather, Cronus was stuffing his face with gingerbread and running around the room laughing while Eridan chased him around shouting about how those cookies were supposed to be for his friends and what sort of violence he would enact on his older counterpart if he would just *slow down*. The kitchen was fairly trashed even though you'd done your best to encourage everyone to clean up as you went (no way in hell were you cleaning up after these idiots after everything).

You took a cookie for yourself and watched as Eridan attempted to beat Cronus with a flour-encrusted rolling pin. What a messy, chaotic, violent... family(?)….

But you had to admit… you didn't feel alone.

The party was set to start at six and end at midnight, a respectable time frame for any party that wasn't being hosted by a highschooler… not that you particularly cared. They were rich and spoiled so it only made sense that their parties would reflect that. Everything was decked out in twinkling lights, color coded and tastefully asymmetrical with a bright purple and gold star in the middle. Eridan may not have celebrated the holiday, but hot damn did he know how to decorate. Not that you expected anything less knowing him; He was the definition of Bougie Bitch (you were fairly certain there was at least one urban dictionary entry referencing him).

You arrived late of course. Their circular driveway already packed with plenty of cars; you had to park pretty far away from the actual house, just on the edge of their substantial property by the hedgeline. Christmas music was audible even all the way out here, silhouettes visible in the windows. You knocked on the door, and suddenly you felt under-dressed for the occasion in your sweater and khakis.

What if this was a fancy party?

You had just come from your last interdepartmental meeting of the semester, the lab reports of your students in the back seat of your car just waiting to be graded.

The door swung open and you were greeted by a very pleased looking Eridan. He wore a thick black turtleneck with violet and gold embroidery (what an extra, bougie bitch) that went to his mid thigh, and red pants; a sheer almost translucent red scarf wrapped around his thin neck and spiraled down his arms. You had to admit, he had an impeccable fashion sense. You told him as much.

"Yes well, it's good of you to notice." He smiled, one of those rare, fleeting genuine ones where his fins fluttered, before letting you in.

The inside was almost stiflingly warm (they really were quite dramatic about the cold for people who actively decided to settle down in Jersey) and decorated even more lavishly than the outside. The walls were strung with garlands and the halls were quite literally decked with boughs of holly. You counted not one, not two, but at least four different Christmas trees and that was just from where you were standing.

"There's food over on the dinin' room table if you want any. We have human Eggnog as well and also somefin called a Yule Log which is actually a chocolate cake and not in fact a slab of tree. Do not tell Cronus… the ruse that humans actually ingest wood is far too amusin' to give up on now."

"Don’t worry.” You stage whispered conspiratorially. “I do my best not to interact with him at all… and if I do, I promise I will tell him that tree branches are an important part of holiday meals.” Honestly it wasn’t that far of a stretch. Cinnamon was just tasty tree bark after all and that was perhaps the most important spice for holiday desserts.

This seemed to please your host who excused himself not long after to go hang out with a group of kids around his own age. He draped his arm around the shoulders of a really dorky looking human kid with buck teeth, glasses, and a smile that could melt even the most frozen of hearts. Ah. That must be John.

The party was already pretty poppin (kids still used that word right?), there were a lot of trolls here… some of them definitely adults. You stood there awkwardly among the masses of large aliens feeling very small and out of place for a few moments….

So like any sane person, you went for the food.

Wow… he really went all out with it. There were several tables laden with food from cookies to candy to what looked like some sort of roasted bird to shrimp and what looked like... Oh god. Those were definitely bugs. Stuffed bugs.

Not that you were judging. If people wanted to eat bugs, they could eat bugs all they wanted. In fact shellfish were basically sea bugs. But uh… bug for dinner just wasn’t what you were feeling.

You found the bowl of eggnog and one of the troll sized mugs to ladle it into. You took a sip.

And then another to confirm.

One: This was the best eggnog you had ever had.

Two: There was most definitely alcohol in this.

Three: Kids should probably not be drinking this.

But you weren’t their guardian so why should you care so much… besides, if you drank all of it, then you could save the kids.

Yes.

You were going to drink this bowl of eggnog dry.

… For the kids.

You were about halfway through your mug when you heard an unexpectedly familiar voice.

“Oh my gog, Teach?”-

You turned to face your star pupil…. Even though her lab notes were a hot mess to get through between mystery stains that smelled like peach schnapps, disorganized rants, and doodles in the margins. Roxy's bright eyes met your own, an infectiously carefree smile on her face. "Well isn't this a pleasant surprise!"

"OMG! Teach! I didn't know you were gonna be here." The flush on her cheeks gave away her partially inebriated state, the festive elf hat she wore partially skewed. "This is so cool! You're like a real person now. Not that you weren't before but like… now you're *real real*."

You gave her a dry smile. "As someone who's been on the other side, I get it. I didn't realize you knew the Amporas."

"Wha- no." She laughed, "Fefie invited me. I don't know whoever lives here… but Feferi and Nepeta said it was cool if I came." She looked over her shoulder at two troll girls chatting animatedly and waved. They enthusiastically returned it. "See? Gog they are just the cutest! Sweet sweet Feferi and clever little Nepeta. Teach just look at them!" She put her hand on your shoulder, the smile on her face full of affection.

You had remember Eridan talking extensively about Feferi, and his description definitely did her justice. Sweet round eyes and cheeks, dark curls cascading down her back. The girl beside her who must be Nepeta was wearing a kitty hat and a green coat, hair shoulder length and wild, a wide toothy grin on her face.

"They are definitely some cute kids." You replied, taking another long swig from your mug.

"We went to school together. They did yearbook club with me 'n Janey. Did you know Fef was supposed to be like… the empress one day? And she was just in yearbook club like a normal ass girl. Cray cray."

"Shit dude… I'm pretty sure Eridan was in a similar position. Like aristocracy or something. Kind of a little shit about it though, but he's getting better." When she gave you a questioning look you elaborated. "I tutor him in math once a week, and let me tell you he's making some strides in both his geometry and being less of a genocidal racist."

Roxy laughed, and for some reason you felt intensely satisfied. It was probably the eggnog hitting you. You always were a lightweight when it came to drinking. "It must have sucked so bad growing up on Alternia."

You hummed in agreement, drinking deeply from your mug.

"Is that the 'nog you got?" You nodded. "That shit's straight up deloycious."

"Yes, yes it is." You downed some more. "I'm sort of used to the crap you get in those cartons. This is so much better."

"Getting drunk with my pro pro!" She snorted, ladling some eggnog for herself. "Teach, oh my gog I was tellin my good and personal friend Jake the Snake about how you know like every single plant out there because he likes to go on adventures and stuff so if he shows up you have to tell him all about it because he likes to go adventures? Wait I think I already said

that…. But like you can tell him about the different plants he can use for like… power ups. Like the extra life mushroom in Mario but like irl. Do they have those irl?"

Another human made her way over to the two of you, noticeably uncomfortable as she glanced furtively at the trolls; Even the small ones were as tall as you were. The adults though were something else. All of them hitting or easily surpassing six feet in height, thick leathery skin and large, impressive horns crowning their head.

"Janey! Janey this is the prof I was telling you about! The cell bio one." Roxy greeted her bespectacled friend.

Jane gave you a curt nod before hissing out, "You didn't tell me this was going to be a Christmas gala with a hundred people. I didn't even realize this many trolls celebrated Christmas."

Roxy rolled her eyes. "C'mon Janey it's the holidays… even if you don't celebrate a specific one doesn't mean that you can't feel it in your heart! Everyone can celebrate Christmas if they want to even if they are aliems. It's like a feeling that you just get when it gets cold and you wanna party. Like lets be fo realsies the church just stole all the solstice holidays and slapped lil baby Je-Je on them so like it's basically a bastard holiday anyway."

Her friend crossed her arms, frowning. "I get that, I just…." She sighed. "I just…. I thought it was gonna be a smaller party…. You said a couple of Feferi's friends not half of the tri-state area. Not that I don't wanna see so many people participating in holiday merrymaking," Jane amended quickly with a nervous laugh.

You nodded.

"I can understand that sentiment. Crowds are kind of the worst." You didn't really feel uncomfortable around trolls, especially after interacting with Eridan and Cronus so frequently, but large crowds of strangers? You turned and poured her a mug of eggnog. "I mean I kind of knew it was going to be a big party going into it because Eridan said he was inviting basically everyone he knew, but honestly I didn't expect him to know this many people. If it makes you feel any better I literally know three people here. One of whom," (Cronus), "I am very much hoping I don't have to interact with at all."

Roxy feigned upset, "Teach! I thought we were having a good time!"

"I don't believe we've been formally introduced though." You held the mug of eggnog you had poured out to Jane as you stated your name. "I was the head lab TA for Roxy's cell bio class."

"Jane Crocker," She replied, soft hand taking the mug from you. "It's nice to meet you."

She reached into her bright red bag and pulled out a tupperware container. "I brought cookies, but I didn't make enough for this many people…. I would have made more if *someone* had warned me there would be this many people here." Jane gave Roxy a *look*.

“C’mon, Janey, don’t even worry about it. We can just have them with Fef and Nep, no one needs to know our lil secret.” Roxy said with a wink.

“I won’t tell, promise.” You gave them a sterilized smile and nod.

“It’s been good seein’ you teach!”

And just like that, you were alone again.

Alone in the crowd.

Cool, cool, cool….

You finished your mug of eggnog in no time at all, already starting to regret coming.

It wasn’t like you didn’t know what you were getting into here… You weren’t exactly close with the Amporas, and you knew that they were basically big-shots back on Alternia.

...Maybe you could follow Roxy…?

No, she and Jane looked really happy eating cookies with their friends. You couldn’t dare impose on that. No…. You would just have to interact with people… like a normal person.

Yeah.

You could do that. (You had somehow convinced your roommate back in freshmen year that you were somehow extroverted… maybe you could pull something off like that again.)

You just had to go up to someone and say ‘Hi, my name is –

Oh god what if you forgot your name.

What if you said something stupid.

You poured yourself another mug of eggnog, grabbed a cookie off one of the many platters, and did your best to stand in the corner looking as inconspicuous as possible.

You managed to look up at just the right time (or perhaps it was the absolute worst time) as an incredibly beautiful troll in a low-cut gown looked over at you from her friend group, eyes locking on you and giving you an appraising look. She gave you a slight smile, jade green lips parting over fangs, before returning to her the conversation her circle was having….

Were… were they talking about you?

Oh god…. What were they saying? (Maybe if you strained your ears hard enough….)

A derisive snort met your ears and you tried your best not to turn to look at who made it. A nasally, lisped voice followed it. “Told me that he wasn’t black for me anymore so I should just back off. Like, seriously you astronomically pan-rotted degenerate piece of fish shit, I

legitimately hate your stupid chumbucket guts in the most unromantic way possible. I'm not into him. I never have been! And even *implying* otherwise.... The next time he does it-"

"Ugh, Tunes, can we like, not talk about him? I'm trying to enjoy this rad as hell human-inspired party and even thinking about him gets my acid tract filled with all kinds of nasty bile."

"Yeah, you're right. He's not even worth the air to complain about."

You almost wondered who they were talking about.

Almost.

You did your best to stare into your mug and not respond. It would be so easy. You could make some new friends and not feel so out of place at this stupid party that you were quickly becoming too drunk to abscond from… you couldn't drive like this.

Maybe if you could commiserate with someone….

But no, the other troll already said that she hated even talking about him.

You took another swig from your mug and looked back up to people watch. That was usually fun at least.

Eridan seemed to be getting along with a small group of trolls and humans, and for once actually looked like he was enjoying himself as a wiry troll girl with an eye patch spoke animatedly, gesturing as though she was telling a dramatic story as another girl in red glasses brandished a similarly colored cane. You couldn't help the small smile creeping on your face… you really were tremendously proud of him.

And then of course, you saw Cronus practically cornering another troll. He was wearing a muted violet and white sweater with "Single and ready to Jingle" knit into the front underneath a mistletoe pattern. Both of his horns were capped off with a little Santa hat with what looked like jingle bells on it. (You begrudgingly admitted that the look could have been very cute if he weren't so gross). The other troll seemed far less than interested, not that the Ampora seemed to take a hint… or a direct and confrontational no.

And there was something immensely satisfying about the way the other troll just tossed their drink in his face, leaving him floundering as they walked away. You ducked into the next room as you saw his head turn towards the sound of your snickers.

Nope.

You were *not* dealing with him tonight. No sir.

Out of the corner of your eye you saw the tallest troll you had ever seen… and he seemed to be staring incredibly intently at you. You swallowed some more 'nog down and looked back. He must have been over eight feet tall, towering horns only a foot or so from the ceiling. His silhouette was almost skeletal, only enhanced by the bone suit he wore, face painted in the

facsimile of a skull. The wild mane of hair on his head stretched out in all directions, and his deep purple eyes locked on yours with all of the intensity of a predator.

And for your part, you had never felt more like prey in your life. Every instinct told you to run as far away from this creature as fast as you could… but you were frozen stiff, unable to look away from his gaze.

It was as though your lungs had stopped working, some primal force telling you not to move, not to breathe because if you did you would be caught.

He was just a troll.

Just a person like every other troll at this party.

run

Just a person.

Yet the terror you felt was palpable… vision tunneling to just him. You could swear you saw his eyes flash.

Run

And you could swear you could feel something scratching at... whispering in the back of your head. Indecipherable except the little voice hissing at you to run.

RUN

He blinked finally, lips curling into a placid smile as he gave a little wave and signed something. You swallowed, only slightly nervous.

Of course he was just a person.

He wasn't some scary predator ready to tear you apart.

He was just a person.

(So why did you feel such a sudden terror).

There was no reason to feel scared. He was just a normal, really tall, lanky, mime guy.

(So why had you felt something clawing at the back of your mind.)

You took a few minutes to calm your racing heart as you gulped down some more eggnog, moving back over to the table to refill your cup.

"Hi!" You nearly jumped out of your skin despite the friendly, pleasant tone. You took a very controlled look at the person next to you.

"Howdy." You replied, doing your best to take them in…. They were smaller than you, wearing a worn black hoodie with a cerulean zigzag and an incredibly friendly smile on their

face. They weren't a troll… but they definitely weren't a human either. You weren't quite sure what they were honestly… but you concluded that they were very much friend-shaped.

Shaped like the platonic ideal of a friend one might even say.

They held out their small hand and you took it, giving them a firm handshake. (A firm handshake was always the best way to go. A firm handshake could get you a lot of places.)

"I'm M[illegible]" When they said their name it sounded like nothing and everything yet somehow perfect. Their warm eyes flickered and flashed with green light, "But you can call me The Mailman."

What a fun nickname.

You gave them your own and they nodded. "Are you a postal worker?"

They just laughed, a charming sound that put you at ease. "I guess you could call me that. I guess that's what I've been doing for… wow it's been a while. Ages. I think Ages is a good way to put it." They grinned, pouring themself a mug of their own. "I couldn't help but notice you look like you could use a friend."

It was your turn to let out a laugh. "Am I that obviously out of my depth?"

"A little. But it's okay, everyone has to start somewhere… and not everyone is good at parties." They patted you on the shoulder, "I hear that you've been helping Eridan." They said after a moment.

"Oh, yeah. I'm his math tutor."

"That's not what I meant." They haphazardly steered you away from the crowd to a window bench where they sat and looked out over the crowd. "He's gone down some very dark paths… there's a lot of bad in him, and I haven't had much time to guide him this time around. I was kind of scared he'd revert back to full on destroyer of **HOPE** instead of with **HOPE**, y'know? He's always been one of the trickier ones to know what to do for. And Cronus...." They just let out a low whistle, "He's... a lot to deal with. Way more energy than I have to spare. Not that I don't want to see him do well, it's just the chaotic nature of **BARDS**. You'd think it'd be the **ROGUES** that go rogue, but nope... it's always the **BARDS**. At least his destructive abilities are passive, not active so they end up more focused on himself than others so he's relatively harmless to the timeline."

"Earth Ω has been a lot of work… I've spent millenia planning things, getting it just right, but there are a lot of outside influences trying to get in."

… Was this… was this god?

"You have no idea how taxing it's been making sure that this timeline remains uncorrupted from outside forces. So I'm glad that some of my friends are still getting the help they need even if I can't always be there." And then they looked at you, and you had never felt so seen

in your entire life. “You have **NARRATIVE INFLUENCE**, a lot of it. I like feeling that in people even if it can scramble some of my plans. It takes some of the pressure off….”

“Every single person at this party has spent so many lifetimes suffering just because the universe demanded it. Just once I want to see them *all* have a happy ending… and I think this is as close as I’ll be able to get without any of them disappearing from existence completely.”

They spoke at length about so many different things and you were just drunk enough to suspend some of your disbelief. There was something about them that screamed ‘*Trust me’*... and though everything they said sounded too far fetched to be true, you couldn’t help but listen. And honestly you were beginning to think that maybe this was god, or maybe you should just lay off the eggnog….

(It was too good to stop though. When were you ever going to get this good ‘nog again?)

“Man it feels good to talk about this with someone who hasn’t been directly involved with the planning and execution.” They swung their beautifully sensual legs for a moment, “I got the most talented posse assembled in all of spacetime, but sometimes I miss being just a normal friendslut, y’know? And I can’t burden the kids with this knowledge… that’s why I did all of this in the first place. To let them be kids. To give them *all* a future where they could be happy. Fuck sad endings. All my homies hate sad endings.”

You nodded along, still very confused about the whole situation. “Sad endings do indeed suck, yeah. But what you’re saying is super far fetched? Like what do you mean multiple lifetimes? Like… parallel universes?”

“Yeah sort of, I guess. But it’s more like every single action has a **RIPPLE** which changes the course of the timeline… and not every timeline is viable especially with the multiverse basically existing to ensure **LE** comes into existence. I’m mostly hopped up on friendship juice and some cray cray power-ups and as we all know, the power of friendship is more powerful than even spacetime.” They flexed. “It took a lot of meditation to understand what **RIPPLES** could be changed and what couldn’t though. But how could I not with so much at stake?”

The mailman got serious after a moment, meeting your eyes with their own that seemed to swirl and glow with all the intensity of a sun. “Not every good **DECISION** is straightforward.” They looked down at their phone (one of those weird bug ones that showed some serious wear and tear) pat your shoulder and smiled again. “Anyways I’ve probably taken up enough of your time. Enjoy the rest of the party.” And just like that they were gone. You blinked a few times, looking around, seeing them skittering along with inhuman speed as they began a conversation with a woman in red, horns curling like a ram’s with wild black hair and a wide, unnerving, chaotic smile on her face.

You wanted to say “wait, don’t go, I have so many questions,” but they were already well out of earshot unless you wanted to shout.

Well it wasn’t like what they said was even true anyway… even though you couldn’t stop thinking about it. Maybe if you had some more Christmas food....

You wandered over, picking up some snowflake shaped cookies and what looked and smelled like mulled cider. You stared at the mug of eggnog and the mug of cider and the cookies.

Why couldn't you have three hands….

You shoved the cookies into your sweater pocket like the *fucking genius* you were before setting out to explore the sprawling downstairs. Navigating the sea of people while a bit inebriated was a task and a half, but you finally managed to escape the crowd for the most part. Wandering down a well lit hall you'd never been down before, but you could see a Christmas tree in the next room so you were pretty sure it wasn't off limits. There were still a few people here; a couple of teenagers, a fashionable troll and human holding hands and having a very involved conversation about the psychological nuances of that kind of coercive song where the man tries to get the woman to stay the night.

You did your best to bother them as little as possible, sipping on your cider and wandering further into the room with the tree.

You stopped dead in your tracks.

Hello.

Hanging on the wall above a luxurious fireplace sat a massive portrait of a troll, two jagged scars running along his face. His expression could only be described as imperious, lips forming a hard line, piercing violet eyes seeming to follow you as you moved.

This dude radiated a very powerful DILF-energy.

This dude was a DILF.

You didn't know his name, but you still put his up at the top of your Celebrity Sex List. Okay sure, he wasn't a human celebrity but a portrait this big and fancy had to count for something. And maybe he was a troll celebrity or something (probably more along the lines of a historical figure given the style of the painting... not that you really knew much about troll paintings but it kind of reminded you of a portrait of Napoleon or George Washington or something... But like if they were sexy).

That man was... exceptional.

You weren't even necessarily that into the daddy kink but if that man wanted to be called daddy you would damn well do it. He could *Get it.*

Hot Damn.

You took another gulp of your eggnog.... You'd been staring too long. People would probably notice and that would make things awkward. You promptly turned around and started examining some ornaments on the tree trying to make yourself seem inconspicuous even though there were maybe a total of four people around.

You sipped on some more of your cider.

Out of the corner of your eye you saw the two teens you had passed by earlier making out on one of the arm chairs in the corner. So you awkwardly made your way out of the room and back into the hall.

You could hear Mariah Carey coming from the main hall and stopped dead in your tracks when you saw several juggalos krumping to her Christmas carols.

You'd had way too much eggnog hadn't you.

Way too much eggnog.

But they were still there and dancing after you blinked, so you concluded two things: This was very real, and was one of the most beautiful displays of unrestrained holiday merrimaking you'd ever seen. They were enjoying Mariah Carey as she should be enjoyed.

"Dam this bih has some srs range. Wonder if she'd wanna do a duet w/ da hottest troll rhyme jugg'ler this side a the milky way." Said the most beautiful and entrancing voice you'd ever heard in your life, and you turned to look at a big troll in jaggalo make-up, a slutty Santa outfit that showed off most of his impeccable chest, and impressively shiny hair down to his ass. "U kno if she'd be down w/ the clown?"

You wanted to say something, anything to keep you from looking like a very stupid, open-mouthed buffoon. He gave you a warm, laid-back smile that melted every bone in your body. "U ok lil buddy?"

"Y-yeah." You managed to stutter.

He just chuckled. "Gotta admit i kinda like this world a lot more n i thot i wuld. Wen my cray lil friendslut first proposed a place like this obvi i saw it in the cards but it was a loooong way off ya dig? im glad i came along 4 the ride tho. Shiiiz iz wildin."

You nodded along as though you were able to piece anything that came out of his mouth together.

Something dangerous and knowing lurked in his eyes as your locked with his. "i luv games jus as much as da next clown, but imma b real wit u b. Sumthin rly Big w/ a capital B cld b happenin 2nite now i dunno wat that sheeet iz yet but i can see dis timeline divergin n gettin all kindz a fxxxked up ya dig?"

"Sure?"

"Wut im gettin at is dat sumhow in all the multiverses out dere u got sum sort of narrative influence... evry decision u make haz consequences. So just make gud decisions so we cn all have a fxxxxxk ton of fun 2nite." He gave you a jovial wink before spinning you around to the beat and dancing off to the next room which erupted into cheers upon his entry.

You polished off the rest of your eggnog.

You took it back, you were definitely nowhere near drunk for this.

It was an impulse decision really… the bottle of bourbon you had pilfered from their extraordinarily well stocked liquor cabinet in your hand calling out to you. You already had a mug of eggnog resting on the kitchen island, but you'd already had plenty of it, and a hot toddy sounded really good. Was bourbon your favorite? Absolutely not. But Martha Stewart had made that recipe sound so good….

And it had looked so pretty the way she had dressed it up with that star anise and cinnamon stick.

You searched around until you found a pot, grateful that the kitchen was empty. Being around so many people at once was draining. Being around that many strangers at once? Torture. If you weren't so drunk, you'd leave but you weren't in any state to drive.

In fact, you should have probably stopped drinking a while ago, you mused to yourself as you heated up the bourbon on their nice stove and threw some cinnamon and lemon in with it. You couldn't find any honey so you added some sugar….

There was something you were forgetting… but for the life of you you couldn't remember. Butter? Orange? You're pretty sure it started with an A. Anise? No.

Tea!

That was it.

You began rummaging around looking for something like tea. Did trolls even drink tea? Shit….

After a moment you found packets of something that smelled a lot like lavender and chamomile so you grabbed those and threw one into the pot… probably close enough to tea. You let it boil for a minute then took it off the heat.

As you looked around for another mug, you noticed that across the hall facing the back of the house in one of those weird limbo foyer rooms that had a glass door to some sort of patio that you'd never actually gotten to see, Cronus sat at the bottom of a large staircase very much alone as he stared out the window.

The strange shadows cast by the twinkling multicolored Christmas lights and the dimness of the room gave him an unearthly quality… (probably because he was an alien) and he…. He looked as lonely as you'd been feeling, and you found couldn't help but feel something awaken in your gut.

The truest difference that set humans apart from every other species. The spirit of Christmas, some may have called it, but it was deeper than that; Primal, powerful, instinctual. The reason almost all societies celebrated the winter solstice, the reason why people could believe

that the nights that were coldest and darkest and least hospitable could be the warmest and brightest of them all.

Compassion.

You finally found a mug to put the very hot toddy in, grabbed your own eggnog, and before you knew it, you couldn't help but follow your feet as they carried you over. He didn't seem to notice you, or maybe he just didn't really care.

"Would have thought you'd be out there trying to hit on everyone." You finally spoke, rousing him from his own thoughts. Cronus finally turned to face you, expression uncharacteristically candid.

He gave a soft, humorless chuckle. "Yeah well, even *I* can only get so many bitches in one night. I'm just one man after all… I get tired too, but I suppose if you really wanted I could squeeze you into my *very* full black book." He gave you a halfhearted smile and a wink.

"Yeah that really sounds just like you. Covered in honeys, have to beat them away with a broom just to walk. So glad you could finally find the space to breathe… but I guess with the axe bodyspray that's pretty hard even when you're by yourself."

"It's actually Calvin Klein bodyspray thank you very much."

"That doesn't make it any better… just more pretentious and expensive."

He shuffled a bit to make room for you on the polished surface. You sat next to him, holding out the hot toddy you had just made. "Here. You look like you need this more than I do."

The softness in his features immediately sharpened into place as he gave you his patented sharky fuckboy smile. "Fell right into the classic Christmas trap." He pointed upwards to where a little bouquet of mistletoe hung and waggled his eyebrows.

"I have to warn you," You sighed heavily, shaking your head at your own foolishness. Of course this disgusting little fish man would try to lure you into something salacious. "This alcohol is very hot and I will pour it on you if you keep being gross."

He sputtered, putting his hands up. "I'm just trying to honor a human tradition. Trying to celebrate your culture because unlike you *I'm* open-minded and not xenophobic! No need to get hostile, kitten. Jeegus…."

"I'm in a very *happy* and committed relationship so I'm gonna need you to tone back the horniness by like…. At least eighty percent. Okay?"

"Fiiiiine." He grumbled, but took the mug you were offering with a peculiar expression that you couldn't quite place. Probably because you were pretty drunk and he was an alien, you mused, nursing a little more of your eggnog.

"Wait… shit, are you even old enough to drink? Like… legally? Don't wanna be giving alcohol to a minor."

“Too late, chief. You already gave it to me, therefore it’s mine. Ain’t no take-backs in the Ampora hive- house. But I’m twelve, if it makes you feel any better.”

It most certainly did not make you feel any better.

Oh god you just gave a mug of bourbon to a twelve year old.

“No! Give it back, you’re too young to have that.” You reached for the mug, but he held it away.

“Oh my god, kitten I’m almost thirteen sweeps old. I’m pretty sure I can drink all the soporifics I want.”

Sweeps…. You blanked out for a moment.

Sweeps.

You racked your brain for the conversion table you’d memorized after first contact…. It was two-ish years to a sweep which made him… around twenty five? Okay that made you feel a little better.

“You uh… you okay there, kitten?” Cronus gave you a concerned look.

“Yeah, sorry, doing math drunk.” You gave him a thumbs up. “You’re an adult, you can do whatever you want.”

“I’m pretty sure I just told you that.”

“No. Here on Earth, twelve years old is just a kid. So giving you alcohol would be bad. But you’re over twenty so it’s fine. We gucci.”

He snorted, “Oh my glub, sometimes I forget you guys don’t measure shit in sweeps. Sorry, thirteen’s like one of the big adult markers… Yeah something like twenty five years or whatever for you guys.”

Cronus took a big gulp from the mug, eyes going wide, coughing and wheezing as it went down. “*Poison!”* He managed to hiss out as he looked at the drink. “Holy shit what the fuck did you even put in there?”

“Rude! It’s a hot toddy. It has bourbon and cinnamon and tea in it.”

“Well it tastes like shit.”

You scoffed, shoving his shoulder. “I spent so long making that special… like at *least* an hour... *probably*. I poured my soul into that drink.”

“Yeah, well your soul tastes like shit.” He grinned, taking another sip and making a face of disgust. “This is literally so bad.”

“Then give it back, jackass.” You reached for it, but he held it away again.

“No, it’s mine.”

“But you hate it! So give it back!”

“Yes, it’s incredibly disgusting, but it’s mine now so you can’t have it. No take-backs.” God he really was just like a petulant child. A rude, petulant child.

“You know how a gestalt is more than the sum of its parts?” Cronus asked after another sip of the hot toddy, giving you a side-eye. You nodded and he continued. “Well this is like that but the opposite. What’s in this cup is less than the sum of its parts. I’m pretty sure this is literally poison.”

“Then stop drinking it.”

He locked eyes with you and took another swig, never breaking eye contact. “This is the most disgusting thing I think I have ever tasted, and I once drank a bottle of squeakbeast poison on a dare. I’m pretty sure if the military got a hold of this, they would use it to torture prisoners.”

“Seriously, if you hate it that much give it back.”

“Nope, it’s crispmass and you gave me a gift. Even if it’s the worst gift anyone’s ever given me.” His words were slurred, v’s and w’s blurring together.

You sighed, rolling your eyes and leaning back against the next step up. From this angle you could see lavender from the Christmas lights bouncing off the thin membranes of his fins. And maybe it was the alcohol, or the faint nostalgic music coming from the other room, but you couldn’t help but stare. Polished orange horns shining with little rainbows dots, a small smile on his grey lips. He was breathtakingly pretty.

“At least you gave me a present I guess. None of my other asshole friends did. Like I get most of them are gutterblood trash-”

He just had to ruin the mood, didn’t he.

“Shooshooshoosh.” You grimaced and put your finger on his lips to quiet him and he froze; Stock still, eyes wide as he stared at you like a deer in the headlights. “God, you’re so fucking pretty, but literally everything that comes out of your stupid mouth is ugly.” You snapped. “So just… shut the actual fuck up for a little while.”

His fins fluttered a little and he seemed to look everywhere except directly at you. You realized after a few moments that you still had your finger on him and removed it, but didn’t look away. In the dim light of the room you could faintly see a violet flush tinting his cheeks, another one of those peculiar expressions on is face.

For a few minutes there was a blissful silence except for the muffled music as Cronus worried his bottom lip between his sharp teeth. “You... You really think I’m pretty….?” He asked after a while, finally turning to face you.

You shrugged, drinking some more eggnog. “Sure. When you’re not being a complete and total d-bag, so uh… very infrequently. You’re kind of a douche a lot.”

He let out a soft, breathy laugh.

“But like... physically? You’ve got a lot going for you…. For an alien I guess. Not that I really know how you guys measure physical attractiveness. But by human standards… your aesthetic is immaculate probably.” You gave him an appraising look and his fins fluttered again. “But your vibes are rancid as fuck, dude.”

His lips curled back in a sneer showing off those perfectly even teeth, and you couldn’t help but wonder if trolls had orthodontics… Were those perfect teeth the product of genetics or did he have to wear braces as a kid. You failed to stifle a snicker at the thought.

It seemed to throw him off guard because the threat display dropped immediately.

“I don’t get it. What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, just alien braces.” You waved him off.

He gave you a quizzical look, but didn’t press you for any more details. He fell silent once more, staring down into the depths of the mug in his hands, fingers fidgeting and clenching. The Christmas music hung heavy in the air.

The snow’s coming down

I’m watching it fall

Lots of people around

Baby please come home

A pang of went through your heart and your grip on your eggnog tightened….

“So where’s this boyfriend you keep talking about?” Cronus asked. “Afraid I’d steal him away from you if he came? After all, I am pretty *and* taller than you.” He raised an eyebrow, lopsided grin growing on his face.

You swallowed, sighing and closing your eyes, already regretting telling him that he was attractive as you tried to drown out the Christmas music through sheer force of will.

“He uh… he’s in Minnesota.”

“Gesundheit.”

A soft laugh escaped your throat. “Halfway ‘cross the country.” You explained.

“Oh shit… What’s he doing out there on crispmas?” You chanced a glance over at him, and were surprised to see his brow furrowed, head tilted… he looked… genuinely concerned.

“He lives out there… so does his family.” You were thankful when your voice didn’t crack or waver. “I was supposed to go visit him, but y’know,” You shrugged, “Life happens.”

“Shit, chief, so you’re tellin’ me,” He paused to let out a bewildered half chuckle. “You’re tellin’ me you’re in a relationship and you *still* ain’t getting any...?” He made an odd, but recognizably lewd gesture with his hand.

“Relationships are about more than sex, Cronus.” You mumbled, trying not to think about the fact that you were going to be very, very alone this Christmas.

“Well, yeah. I know that.” He rolled his eyes. “But like… don’t you get lonely?”

Your jaw clenched, you were simultaneously way too drunk and not drunk enough for this conversation. “Nope. Never.”

Loneliness whom? You do not know her. (If you tell yourself enough, it’ll be true. That’s how emotions work, right?)

He pursed his lips, eyes narrowing as he searched you for something.

Ah fuck, was he making an insight check? Is that what insight checks looked like? Did you roll high enough on your deception?

“Humans are fuckin’ weird as hell.” The sea-troll said after a few moments. “I just don’t get it. Like what kind of quadrant are you even in that that sort of distance makes sense? I thought you guys were flushed but you ain’t even pailing so what’s the point of it?”

“Pailing?” What kind of bullshit was he on about now….

“Sex.” Cronus opened his mouth as if to say more, but closed it with an exasperated huff instead. He definitely looked like he wanted to keep probing you for more information, but he just stared into the contents of his mug.

I’d hold back this tear

But it’s Christmas day

Baby please come home

Baby please come home

Michael Buble finally finished his pining, and were immediately assaulted by Elvis pleading with Santa to bring his baby back to him.

Fuck… you could just not catch a break tonight.

The fuckboy next to you was unusually silent, leaving you stewing in your own thoughts like some sort of asshole without distracting you. How absolutely inconsiderate of him.

Finally an overtly commercial musical Christmas classic started playing, tacky, respectable Christmas music that wasn't constantly reminding you that your boyfriend was halfway across the country and your family was on a different continent.

Actually... a few songs passed (which you'd begun humming along to) before Cronus spoke again.

"Why doesn't anyone like me?"

His voice was soft as he stared longingly into the other room, past the set of french glass doors where the rest of the party was; silhouettes of people mingling and muffled laughter. "I… I know people don't like me, I just don't understand. No matter what I do and…. I try so, so hard… but I just can't figure out what people want. I…." He trailed off.

You watched him for a moment, but he never stopped gazing through the glass.

"Do you want an honest answer?" Normally, you would revel in the chance to make an exhaustive list of his many flaws, but the expression on his face was so different from what you were used to, and the warmth of Bing Crosby's voice made you pause.

And you think you may have finally figured out what Cronus was about.

He looked at you with big violet eyes, chewing on his bottom lip, then nodded.

And everything about him hit just a little too close to home.

"Well," You took a deep breath, "I… I think I get you now. Where you're coming from at least… because I've been there before. And I guess I want to help you," And began to explain to him exactly why he was such an unlikable bastard starting with the callous way he treated his friends that you had overheard (honestly you weren't even sure if you could call them friends with how clearly he was despised and mostly for very good reason), blatant attempts at manipulating people into sleeping with him, his casual use of what you're pretty sure are slurs, or at least incredibly really rude words, how there's nothing genuine about how he presents himself, finishing on a softer note with the overwhelming amount of body spray and cologne he wore.

And to his credit, he just sat there and listened (though his fins drooped more and more with each new bullet point).

You did your best to be as constructive as possible, but the increasingly dejected look on his face left you feeling… less satisfied than how you would have imagined a moment like this would feel. When you finished, you couldn't help but reach down and take his hand in your own, threading your fingers together.

He was cold to the touch, skin smooth besides a few thin ridges along the sides of his fingers. He stiffened for a moment before relaxing just a bit, squeezing your hand back tight enough

to almost be uncomfortable.

You sat like that for a little while, hand in hand

You took another sip of your eggnog, starting to get a little sick of the taste.

Cronus' eyes were glassy as though he was blinking back tears, and you felt kind of bad. It was definitely something that he had to hear, and you'd tried to do it as tactfully as possible… but you were very drunk, and you weren't great with words or comforting or emotions even when you weren't.

Fuck… you're pretty sure you heard him sniffle a little.

"If I'm really so awful, why'd you even come over here?" His voice wavered a little, but didn't crack, staring down into his hot toddy (that you had so painstakingly prepared and was probably delicious as hell and not at all disgusting like Cronus kept insisting).

You took a moment, breathing deeply and giving his hand a squeeze.

"Because no one deserves to be alone on Christmas." He finally looked back at you again, violet eyes locking with your own… damn even when he was a wreck he was pretty. You wished you were half that pretty when you were having an existential crisis.

And before you even realized what you were doing, you had brought his hand to your lips to place a chaste kiss to his knuckles.

It couldn't have lasted for more than half a second, but you had never seen anyone look so incredibly flustered in their life. His eyes went wide, almost round like egg yolks with little violets in them, a deep flush on his cheeks, fins flicking. His mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water (you would have laughed if you hadn't been too drunk to realize the appropriateness of the analogy), but all that came out was a shaky exhale.

Cronus looked away and buried his face in his forearm, a very alien clicking sound coming from his throat, a small smile playing on his lips.

"You know I really thought we had a good black rapport…. I thought you hated me…." He mumbled after a minute with a little drunk giggle.

Well he wasn't wrong… you definitely hated him. Or at least… you hated everything he represented. Or… you thought you did.

"Well, I mean you definitely weren't my favorite person in the world…. But hate's a little harsh." (To say out loud.)

He snorted. "Oh I was definitely waxin' pitch for ya. I thought that's why you gave me this gross drink."

"It's delicious, and if you keep insulting my beautiful concoction I'm gonna get mad."

His laugh was breathy, “No, it’s legitimately disgusting as hell.” The troll chanced a glance at you, cheeks still flushed a bit, a candid, lopsided smile on his face. “’m not even pitch flirting right now, this is the worst thing I’ve ever put in my mouth.”

You huffed. “Well no accounting for taste….”

There was a lull as you got sidetracked by Bing Crosby singing Rudolph, which of course you couldn’t help but hum along.

“Do–” Cronus graciously waited for you to finish before continuing. “Do you want to be moirails...? Like with me, I mean…. Us as moirails.” He seemed torn between looking at you and at the floor, leg bouncing up and down.

Fuck.

You were pretty sure that was an alien romance thing, but he was being moderately tolerable right now, so you were going to give him the benefit of the doubt and ask first.

“Is that one of your troll romance things?”

He nodded shyly.

God, what a mess….

You were very much not looking for another relationship… things were good with Phil. And even if you were looking, Cronus wasn’t exactly your first pick… or your second… or third. In fact, in terms of people you actively wanted a romantic relationship with, he was pretty far down the list. Like maybe as a one night stand to broaden your horizons on alien biology (the way those fishnets had shown off those slate grey thighs of his on Halloween had not escaped your notice as much as you’d liked to deny it….), but as an actual romantic partner… absolutely not.

“Before– Before you say anything, it’s not one a’ the sex ones.” He elaborated. “Unless you want it to be of course let’s be real I’m always dtf, but it’s about like pale emotions and like soft stuff and feelings jam piles….” He got increasingly fidgety as he went on, finally he ran his hand through his hair and mumbled out a quick, “Actually don’t answer please….”

You gave his hand a squeeze and a little “Just honorin’ the old human tradition of mistletoe, kitten, but you got it, chief, I ain’t answerin’ nothin’.” You replied in an imitation of his ridiculous, inauthentic Brooklyn accent which made him laugh. You absolutely did not have enough time for more than one romantic entanglement (you barely had time for the one, honestly), and even if you did, something told you that Phil wouldn’t be open to a romantic interloper even if you weren’t having sex. Not that you based all of your decisions on Phil of course.

Cronus drank some more of the hot toddy, lips pulling back over his sharp teeth in disgust.

“I swear to god if you say one more bad thing about my delicious tod hotty I’m gonna punch you.”

He gave you a shit eating grin and bumped your shoulder with his.

“Hey, you wanna see somethin’ I never showed anyone ‘fore?” He asked, that big smile still fixed on his face as he stood up (slightly hunched so as to keep holding your hand).

You got up to follow him. “Cronus, I swear to god if it’s your weird alien dick I’m gonna get one of those giant clowns to beat you to death.”

“Hey now, don’t be hasty. My bulge is pretty fuckin’… majestic and amazing and great and beautiful, and I will definitely give you a hands on demonstration of all it can do if you wanna see it,” He replied with a wink as he brought you down a dim corridor to a door. “But no, that’s not what I was gonna show ya.”

He opened the door and began to lead you down a *very* dark stairwell. “Wait, are you bringing me down here to kill me?” You asked, taking a cautious step as you felt your way down, half resisting his tug to get you to go faster. Stairs were already hard when you were drunk… stairs that you couldn’t see… that was like master mode. “Are you gonna cask of amontillado me, bro?” You started snickering. “Ah yes, chief, I have a rare vintage down here. Quite refined for your palate, here this way, my dear, if you’d like to see it.”

“Oh boy would I!” You replied to yourself in an enthusiastic falsetto, “Of course I’ll go down to the wine cellar with you to go get it. You certainly have nothing nefarious planned.” You were full on ugly laughing now. “You just want me to stand over there? Oh sure, of course! Those bricks and mortar surely aren’t meant to trap me within the walls–”

Your heart skipped a beat as your foot slipped and you began to fall forward.

Oh god… this was how you were going to die, wasn’t it.

Here in some rich fuck’s basement, drunk at the foot of the steps (in Jersey no less, the armpit of America) before you had even gotten your doctorate… all that debt for nothing. You hadn’t even seen your boyfriend in person yet…. Who would tell him of your demise?

What would they even say at your funeral? There lies what’s-their-name, they were studying something at some college. They died in New Jersey and ruined everyone’s Christmas by making them all come back there where we will inter their body….

You were dead.

You had died.

Against a cold wall.

Covered in eggnog.

What a waste.

“You okay, kitten?” The wall shifted under you.

“No… I’m dead.” You mumbled into what felt like fabric.

“Are… you sure about that? You look pretty alive to me.” He placed a large hand on your shoulder and steadied you. “Look, babe, I know that it feels like human heaven when you’re in my arms, but you only fell like maybe three feet. I know you guys ‘re fragile and stuff, but I don’t think that’d kill ya.”

“Oh….” You blinked a few times, adjusting to the light as Cronus flipped the switch. Yeah, you were definitely alive and in a wine cellar (it had those fancy lattice shelves that stored wine bottles, but they were mostly empty. “You aren’t really going to cask of amontillado me, are you? Please say you’re not going to imprison me in the walls….”

“What the fuck are you even talking about, kitten? I don’t know what that is.” He took your hand again and tugged you forward as he kept moving. Between two of the shelves there was another hallway which he led you down. “C’mon, I ain’t gonna hurt ya, I promise.”

He opened another door and turned on the lights.

It… looked like a sound booth with a few instruments and microphones.

“This is my music studio.” A giant, toothy smile was on his face when you looked at him. “Pops really doesn’t like my music so I do it all down here where he can’t hear it.” He looked a little sheepish, sitting down in the lone chair in the room next to a keyboard and a piano. “But this is where the Cronus Ampora magic happens… or where it would happen if magic wasn’t fake as shit. Where- Where the Cronus Ampora *music* happens. There we go, that’s what I meant to say.”

“Cool.” You nodded appreciatively. “*Very* cool.”

You were a goddamn word smith.

“Did you check out my soundcloud?” He asked hopefully.

Oh crap….

“Yes, yes I did check out your soundcloud.” You said with what you hoped was a straight face.

“What’d you think?” He looked excited, but let out a nervous chuckle. “No one I know takes the time out to actually listen to it so I don’t get to ask much.”

“Uhhhh….” You racked your brain for something to say about it other than, “It was very sexual.” Shit… you really said that out loud didn’t you.

Cronus rolled his eyes. “Yeah, that’s the point. Popular music is usually about love or sex, something like ninety-ish percent of the top billboard songs are about sex. Sex sells. People like sex. And let’s be real… that’s kind of my whole deal, I don’t know if you’ve noticed.”

You honestly didn’t know how to respond to that. Sure… a lot of songs on the radio had sexual themes… but…. “Did you… Did you actually research that? Is that an actual fact or like… something you’re guessing at?”

“No, it’s featured in about sixty percent of top hits on Alternia, but if you look at the whole quadrant system, that’s in about ninety five percent of top hits. And I wanted to see what sort of musical themes made up human music too…. You guys are at about ninety percent about erotic love themes in your most popular music.” He sort of shrugged, but waggled his eyebrows when your eyes met. “What can I say… It’s a compelling subject. And if you ever want a course in alien anatomy, kitten, you know I’m willin’ to tea–”

“What did I say about dialing the horniness back.”

He rolled his eyes again. “Nyeh, was worth a shot. But even you gotta admit you basically set yourself up for that one.”

“Committed and happy relationship.” You leaned against the wall, noting that there was still some eggnog in your mug (and here you had thought that it’d all spilled on you when you fell) and trying your hardest to quell that (purely scientific) curiosity about alien anatomy. “So, I see a keyboard, a piano, a guitar… how many instruments can you play?”

Cronus began mumbling, counting on his fingers, “Including the human ones I learned, like five? I think? Six if you count the synth.”

Holy shit.

“Holy shit. So you’re like… actually talented. I suppose you had to have some redeeming qualities other than just being pretty.” He squinted, and you amended, “Wow, that sounded a lot ruder than intended. I meant that that’s baller dude. That’s a lot of instruments and I’m very impressed.”

He flushed a little bit more, pleased grin showing off those shark teeth. He set the hot toddy on the top of the piano as he situated himself at his keyboard. “Do you wanna hear what I’m currently working on?”

Oh yay…. More alien sex music…. Fantastic.

But he was being so tolerable and open and crushing his music dreams on Christmas felt so wrong that you couldn’t help but manage a “sure, why the hell not?”

Cronus positively beamed, and his voice was so pretty, and the composition was decent, but the lyrics were just such garbage…. You made a game for yourself by counting the use of the word bulge… He’d said it over twenty times in a four minute period.

“And then the end is gonna go like this: Bulge, bulge, yank my bulge like you mean it.” He finished, looking over at you expectantly. Twenty three.

You tried to give him an encouraging smile, but you were pretty sure it looked like a grimace…. “How married are you to those lyrics?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Like… how attached to those lyrics are you? They’re kind of….” You racked your brain for a good way to word it. “Sub-optimal.”

His face fell. “Oh….”

“It just didn’t feel… genuine? Like it felt performative even for a song.” Geez, you were really doing this weren’t you. Your department head had accused you of being too blunt on multiple occasions, and here you were proving him right. “Music wise, it was fun, and your voice is very nice…. But the lyrics seem forced. You already have a bajillion songs about sex, isn’t there anything else you want to sing about? Maybe express a genuine emotion? Like when you look at a flower or something, how does that make you feel? Or like when you’re staring up at the stars at night contemplating existence, or even- even your favorite food. Haven’t you ever tried to sing about those things instead? Or to tell a story?”

“Like… music can be such a magical medium. It’s so versatile, and you have so much potential if you’d just… I dunno, explore some more of that versatility, and get yourself out of that sexual lyrics only mindset.”

Cronus regarded you with a mixture of concern, disbelief, and what you really hoped was thoughtfulness (but honestly looked a lot like revulsion). “Magic is fake as shit…. But I’ll… I’ll think about it. Maybe.”

It definitely sounded a lot more like a placating response than something he genuinely felt, but it was a start at least.

He leaned back, expression relatively neutral as he looked you up and down (making you feel less uncomfortable than usual). “So, got any requests? More of that crispmas music?”

You shrugged, “I guess whatever you feel like playing? Although I’m really not feeling the whole eros thing right now so like…. I dunno.”

You were so fucking eloquent.

“C’mon, you always have strong opinions. *Always.*”

“Damn, B, that’s a lot of pressure to put on a bitch.” You replied, sliding down the wall to the floor. “Play me your prettiest non-sexual song.”

He just laughed. “Babe, all songs are sexual. Even if they don’t sound like they are, I can guarantee they’re about sex. Everything people do is about sex.”

You stared at him, dumbfounded by the coldest take you’d ever heard spoken aloud. Sure, you’d heard the argument before (usually by crusty old white authors), but you never thought anyone ever believed them.

“Is it though? Like this, right here. I’m here trying to be your friend in a non-sexual capacity, and my following you down here was not motivated by sex other than maybe the desire *not* to have sex with you… because I don’t know if you’ve picked up on many of the incredibly subtle hints I’ve been leaving for you like a little crumb trail, I don’t want to have sex with you. Period.”

Cronus pouted a little. “Okay, valid. Mean, but valid.”

You snorted, “That’s hardly the meanest thing I’ve said to you even tonight.”

“That’s very true. You’re very mean to me.” He batted his eyelashes at you. “What do you want me to play?”

“Uhhh… I guess just do what you want? I just am not in the mood for sex music, it’s just not my thing. No offense to your music or your attempts at trying to seem deep.”

He scoffed at you, rolling his eyes and taking another sip from the hot toddy.

“Hey, hey, hey, Cronus.” You nudged his foot with yours. “Play a song about how fucking great that delicious hot toddy is in a very non sexual way.”

That made the troll laugh. “I’m telling you with no ult- ult-” He paused for a moment, squinting in thought, “*Fuck I know this word … Ulterior* motive right now, babe, this is awful.”

You gave him a dry look. “You keep saying that, but you still keep drinking it which means that it’s amazing and the best and not at all gross and that you should make a song about that hot toddy because obviously you feel very strongly about it. Do it do it do it.” You nudged his foot in time with your chanting. “Do iiiiiit.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll sing about your stupid drink, because you’re damn right I feel very strongly about it.” Cronus started up a tune on his keyboard and began to sing out, “It’s crispmas time on earth/ and it’s kind of a weird holiday/ you give and get gifts/ and someone gave me the worst drink ever as a gift/ and it doesn’t have a receipt so I can’t return it.” It didn’t really rhyme and wasn’t really on any specific key but he made a simple tune of it. “They keep insisting it’s great/ but I’m pretty sure they don’t have a sense of taste/ because it’s gross as hell and drinking it is killing my tongue/ but no one else even got me anything so I’ll keep drinking it/ and complain because it’s really shit.”

He stopped and gave you a smug as hell smile. “Happy?”

“Noooo….” You whined, but couldn’t help but return his grin because it was… nice. “It’s not gross!! It’s great!”

“I’m telling you, kitten, for real this is disgusting.”

“It’s delicious.”

He just raised an eyebrow, “Here. If it’s so delicious, you have some.”

“If you’re just trying to kill me with your alien saliva venom because those flowers didn’t work I’m gonna be mad.” Cronus just put his hands up as best he could as you reached for the offered cup and took a confident swig.

Oh…

Oh that was a mistake.

It took every shred of willpower to not spit it back up and out, and with a grimace you managed to swallow it down. The feeling of it going down your throat was unimaginable, burning, stripping your esophageal lining like varnish from a table.

The citrus and floral lavender aftertaste only exacerbated the feeling that you'd just drunk some sort of hazardous cleaning fluid.

"Delicious," You coughed, putting the mug down.

His shoulders shook as he laughed at you. "Oh my glub, kitten, you should see your face right now!"

You looked at him through watery eyes. "I'm only making this face because your gross backwash is probably corrupting this amazing concoction I made."

His laugh petered off, a deep violet flush on his face as he fidgeted a little, quiet for a moment. "I really thought we had some pitch tension… but like I know humans aren't typically into that kind of stuff but I just really thought there was something there y'know? Like… fuck I'm pretty sure I was going somewhere with this but I'm pretty fucking drunk I'm not gonna lie."

You snorted. "Yeah, I'm pretty fucking toasted myself."

Polishing off the last of the eggnog to get the taste of that…. *Fantastic* hot toddy out of your mouth, you rested your head back against the wall, eyes closed. "I gotta admit this is a lot funner than getting wasted alone while shotgunning hallmark movies like crappy fair funnel cake."

"What's that?"

"Funnel cake or hallmark movies?"

"I guess both," He said, leaning back in his chair.

"Well funnel cake is like… sweet fried dough with powdered sugar." (Honestly you could go for one right now.) "And hallmark movies are really cheesy formulaic movies about like… finding stereotypical straight white people romance… but they're kind of fun to watch. Like main plot is almost always some successful career person from the city goes to a little country town for their job and falls in love with some flannel wearing like woodcarver or farmer or something and then they quit their job to live the small country lifestyle. Real fluffy insubstantial shit but sometimes its nice to watch something low stakes that you know is going to work out in the end y'know?"

"Would you show me? If… if you want to I mean." He looked a little sheepish. "I ain't ever seen one 'fore and so maybe it could be fun and stuff… not that I'm super into sappy shit but it's crispmass. And you like them, right?"

"Sure why not." At least it would give you something to do while you sobered up. And hell, maybe he was right, maybe it would be fun.

He positively beamed. “Awesome! – I mean uh… cool. Very cool. Just a couple of cool cats watching stupid movies.”

You snorted.

“See... the awesome was perfectly fine. You trying to make yourself sound cool was absolutely ridiculous and unnecessary and made it weird.”

“You’re ridiculous and unnecessary.” Cronus stuck his tongue out as he stood up, holding out a hand to you to help you up.

You took it, “What are you, twelve?”

“Yes.”

Ah yes, how could you have forgotten.

You went to give him a playful shove but he was like a rock. A dense, six and a half foot rock, and it had the opposite effect of you swaying a bit.

That shuckboy had the gall to just laugh at your expense like some sort of jerk, and you were about to respond but he just tugged you along out of his little sound studio and into another room along the same hallway. It was a fair size, well furnished with a large couch, a tv, some poofy bean bag chairs, a record player and several shelves filled with what looked like dozens if not more records, and a wall covered in pictures of John Travolta.

“This is my dude cavern.” Cronus said without a hint of shame.

And you fucking lost it, drunkenly giggling.

Dude Cavern.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, nothing.” You mumbled, flopping onto the couch.

Ooo very plush. A+ couch.

He sat down next to you and when you didn’t move away he rested his head on your shoulder.

“Cronus, you reek of cologne. It’s offending my delicate human sensibilities.” You shoved him off.

“Yeah, I smell sexy as hell. But you? You smell like dairy products.”

Gross.

You looked down at your damp sweater… eugh he was right you did smell like dairy (with a hint of cinnamon). God it was only gonna get grosser the longer you kept it on.

He looked at you quizzically. “Jeegus, kitten, you okay?”

“No. My sweater smells like milk.”

“Do….” He fidgeted again, “Do you want one of mine? I think I have a spare in here somewhere.”

The troll hopped off the couch and opened a door you hadn’t noticed before, rummaging around. He pulled something out, looking over at you before shaking his head and pulling out a different wad of cloth, tossing it over to you. “Try that one out.”

You rolled your eyes. “No, you’re literally standing right there. I’m not giving in to your shameless ploy to see me topless.”

He clicked his tongue, a static-y sort of soft buzz coming from him. That was a new one. “Fine. Don’t change then.”

Cronus sat down next to you again, still reeking of cologne. You wrinkled your nose. “I don’t mean to be a rude house guest but your cologne’s gonna give me a headache if I’m in prolonged proximity to it… I know it sounds silly, but I really do get headaches from aerosol scents….” God this was awkward…. Maybe you should just go. You were being rude. But you were drunk, and you kind of wanted to watch Hallmark movies…. The Mailman was right about at least one thing: sad endings sucked, and you wanted to watch some mindless holiday movies and see shit work out in the end. “Go make yourself smell less like a perfume department.”

“Fiiine I’ll go wash it off.” He got up again with a huff. “Unless you want to wash it off for me.” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively but you just nudged (shoved) him with your foot. He went back to that same door, rummaging around and pulling some things out and heading over to yet another door you hadn’t noticed before.

(You really needed to brush up on your observation skills… though it was probably because you were drunk.)

Pausing to look at you one more time he asked, “Could you put on a movie? We have literally all of the cable. Human cable. Troll Cable. Streaming services ‘n shit too.”

He disappeared into what looked like a little bathroom from the glimpse you caught before he shut the door leaving you alone.

Bougie ass bitch. Rich people and their ‘cable’ services. You hadn’t paid for anything in years and you intended to keep it that way.

You flipped through about a thousand and one channels, self conscious about the milk smell that refused to be put out of your mind. Frustrated you tossed the remote on the couch, gave a hasty look at the door Cronus had gone into. You could still hear the sound of water running, so as quickly as you could, you shimmied out of your gross dairy clothes and into the hoodie he’d tossed you. It was massive, a deep plum color with that squiggly symbol the Amporas wore in lilac bordered by violet and gold. You practically felt like you were swimming in it.

But it was dry, and warm, and smelled like detergent with only a hint of the body spray he usually wore and a faint briny scent that reminded you a little of nori. Altogether not unpleasant. (Actually you found you didn't mind it at all).

You piled your eggnog drenched shirt and sweater next to the door so you would remember them later (kind of dreading putting them back on for your drive home), and switched the tv over to one of the streaming services. Finding a hallmark movie from there was no problem at all.

It still sounded like the water was going so you got up to check out one of the posters on the wall of John Travolta. Well at least you knew for a fact who Cronus was trying so hard to emulate. Although come to think of it, you rarely saw him in a leather jacket.

He'd been in there kind of a while... but you supposed that that was probably normal for someone with gills. You had begun to flip through a few of his records before the door opened.

Cronus looked…. Different.

Hair in a messy, damp, slightly curly mop instead of neatly slicked back with who knows how many products, wide circular glasses perched on the bridge of his nose, clad in a hoodie and sweat pants. The hot toddy mug still clutched in his hand. (Had he brought that into the bathroom with him?)

There was something about him that felt eerily familiar though. You couldn't quite place it until you saw the two scars on his forehead.

Two little twin lightning bolts.

You failed to stifle your giggle.

"Yeah, I get it. I just figured why not be comfortable since you've made it pretty fuckin' clear we ain't gonna fuck tonight…." He trailed off, looking at you intently, violet blush spreading from his cheeks to his fins.

"You look like troll Harry Potter," You finally managed to wheeze out.

"Who?"

"Y'know, Harry Potter? The," You snorted. "The little wizard boy? All you need is a little wand." You wiped your eye a bit before laughing again.

His face fell immediately.

"You know, Expecto Patronum." You waved your hand around.

"Wizards aren't real and magic is fake as shit." He snapped, sclera darkening from that eggy yellow to a dark orange, his lips pulled back over his teeth into a snarl.

Your laughter petered out.

Well that was unexpected.

“Which one of my friends put you up to this?” His eyes were bordering on red.

“W-what?”

“Which one of them put you up to this? It was Meenah wasn’t it?” The ceramic mug in his hand cracked, finally shattering, crushed into pieces.

You had known he was strong. Trolls typically were stronger than humans by default, but that… that was a lot of exerted pressure. You’d never seen him this angry before. Angry, sure.

This was new.

“Or was it Mituna? No that four horned bile snorter does his own dirty work. Aranea?”

“Cronus?”

“Kurloz? No that mime freak won't even talk….” He closed his eyes, turning his face away, pinching the bridge of his nose and tapping his foot in frustration. “Look I’m not… I’m not mad at you.” He ground out, finally turning to look at you again, face contorted into a forced smile. “I just want to know who the *Fuck* put you *up to this*.”

Part of you knew that you should be cautious. You’ve never seen him like this. He was stronger than you, probably an obligate carnivore given the teeth, and could technically probably rip you to shreds. But this was also still Cronus.

That goofy fuckboy who had a business card for his soundcloud account. The dork who researched what themes popular music had. Obsessed with sex and looking cool and apparently John Travolta.

His jaw clenched as he looked up at the ceiling, fingers balled into fists at his side as he waited for your answer.

And you couldn’t find it in you to be even slightly afraid of him.

You took a step forward, cupping his cheek in your hand to turn his face toward you.

He froze.

“No one put me up to this, Cronus. It wasn’t my intention to upset you. I’m sorry. It was a bit of Earth pop culture humor that I didn’t realize would be a sore subject. I won’t bring Harry Potter or wizards and shit up again. I’m sorry I hurt you, I’ll try to be more mindful.” You brushed your thumb idly over a freckle.

His pupils dilated from narrow slits to wide saucers like a cat entering the silly zone. He closed his eyes and leaned into your touch, tension leaving his shoulders as a small smile formed on his lips. “Of course you wouldn’t….” He murmured, a deep clicking sound coming from his chest. “Such a good, perfect human.”

A perfect one-eighty from rage he'd been exuding just moments before. (Also completely new).

His eyes opened only partially.

You'd never seen anyone look quite so blissed out (except maybe after mind-blowing, extremely satisfying sex)

(Or when using one of those weird whisk-looking head massager things. Those were legitimately the most amazing invention humans had ever come up with. Better than most of the sexual encounters you'd had if you were completely honest).

You slid your hand down his cheek as you pulled away (You were pretty sure you saw him shiver but you weren't too sure). "We good?"

"Yeah." He gave you a droopy eyed smile and put his hand on your cheek, attempting to imitate your action, But his hand was sort of still wet and a little cold and it was weirdly intimate and kind of awkward.

Shying away you pointed to the remains of the mug in his other hand. "You should probably get that cleaned up a little. I got the movie all set up already."

He just nodded and did as you instructed, plopping down on the couch next to you after washing up and hitting the light switch. Cronus didn't put his head on your shoulder this time, but leaned back leg pressing up against yours as he put a cigarette (that he didn't light) between his lips . The movie was standard goofy fair: A pretty young, driven, career woman was sent to a small town to try to buy out some little bakery so the chain she worked for could open up a store on that property, but it was owned by a sweet old woman who was friends with a plainish, scruffy man wearing flannel. They bantered with lukewarm sexual tension like the corny B-list actors they were, reading off the bland cookie cutter formulaic script.

But Cronus seemed really into it, curling up against your side and without thinking, you wrapped an arm around him, hand mussing his hair. It was thick and very dense and surprisingly less damp than you expected. He snuggled up closer, That deep rumbly clicking returning…. Actually you're pretty sure that was a troll happy noise. Like a purr or something. Which was, admittedly, kind of cute, unexpected and not as cute as like a cheetah purring, (it was definitely a lot more like an insect sound than a cat purr) but still cute nonetheless.

He fiddled with the cig a bit, alternating chewing on it and rolling it between his fingers... but he never lit it. You'd never actually seen him with a lit cigarette before. "Why don't you ever light them?"

He gave an inquisitive hum, looking over at you.

"Your cigarettes... you never light them. Why is that? Not that I'm encouraging you to smoke them because it's actually pretty gross, but like... typically you're supposed to light them up and suck that smoke down."

His fins flicked and he gave you a sheepish look, "I uh... I've tried to a few times, but it hurts my gills too much."

You gave him a nod.

"But I really dig the cool cat greaser aesthetic...." He trailed off when you ruffled his hair.

At the two thirds mark the actors kissed, decided that they were in love, and you gently ran your nails along Cronus' scalp. He leaned into the touch. "You really thought I hated you?" You asked after a moment.

"Well, yeah." He looked up at you with a lopsided grin. "I thought it was like a mutual thing."

"You hate me?" That…. Unexpectedly hurt. You really thought he liked you, and yeah maybe the attention wasn't wanted, but him hating you felt… weird.

"Not anymore," He replied hastily. "But you were a huge bulge munch and you were so mean all the time. That's why I really thought we could have a serious kissmesitude. Got some really pitch emotions going on." Cronus butted his horns against your shoulder. "I mean sure, we wouldn't a' been able to get real violent like a lot of kissmesises because let's be real, I'm way stronger than you are and I could probably accidentally break you in half in an actual fight which is kinda frowned at, but there was a lot of verbal jabs and like intellectual fights instead of physical fights and I was down to make that work. Hate is a very sexy emotion."

"So like… a hate-fuck kind of thing?"

"Exactly. You gotta like your kissmesis, but you gotta hate them too. A rivalry. A sexy rivalry."

"Like what Eridan's been feeling toward John?"

He nodded, "But like I said, right now I definitely don't hate you." The smile he gave you was soft, and in the dim light you noticed that the rims of his irises seemed to faintly glow. The drama on screen drew his attention again. The woman was arguing with her boss on why the small bakery should stay the way it was, but the execs were adamant about furthering their capitalist agenda (ironic given Hallmark literally churned out dozens of the same exact movie for profit).

(Though you supposed all corporations did that: creating anticapitalist stories for capitalist profit).

"I could take you in a fight." You said after a while and he just snorted.

"Maybe before my last few molts. No offense, toots, but I can take and dish a serious pounding. In more ways than one," He looked back at you to give you a sleazy wink. "I c'n show you right now if you want."

You shoved him, but the angle was awkward and he was heavy as hell.

You weren't really feeling any more sober than you had before the movie begun (probably because you'd had another shot's worth of that objectively ~~awful~~ *delicious* hot toddy that was just straight up flower flavored hot bourbon). Definitely not sober enough to drive at least. You tried to do the math as to when you'd be good but got lost halfway through.

(Math was stupid anyway).

The woman quit her job to work at the bakery at the last moment, just in time for Christmas, holding hands with the male love interest as they stared up at a giant Christmas tree saying something corny about the magic of Christmas. Ending on them laughing and kissing.

Cronus was silent for a while. "Magic is fake and stupid… but I guess the movie wasn't wholly awful."

You looked down at him, and your breath caught in your chest.

In the dark you could now see thin pale violet lines of light stretched along his skin in an intricate pattern. Freckles lighting up like dim stars in the night.

After a few moments he looked up at you, that same faint bioluminescent light illuminating his irises. It wasn't anywhere near bright enough to fully make out his expression.

"Wanna watch another one? I mean… just to show me how much they're basically very the same?" His V's and W's were nearly indistinguishable and you idly wondered if that was an accent kind of thing or just a him thing.

"I don't see why not." You murmured finally.

He selected another movie and leaned heavily against you, shifting to wrap an around your waist.

There was absolutely nothing wrong with this. You were friends (sort of). You cuddled with your friends all the time… or well… you used to back when you all lived close together and could hang out. Back before adulthood hit in full swing and people started getting married or moving in with their partners or moving away or just growing apart.

You weren't lonely. At all. How could you be with your wonderful boyfriend (who was halfway across the country)? And your friends still texted you regularly even though none of you ever had enough overlapping time off to hang out.

You weren't lonely… but god it felt nice to just physically exist in a space and be reminded of that fact by the pressure of another person against your skin.

The comfort was purely biological. (You knew this for a fact). Oxytocin was produced by physical contact (and yeah maybe you were a little touch starved you couldn't lie about that), but perhaps it was a combination of the alcohol and the contact because you felt a lot more… quiet than you had in a while.

Not quiet in the physical sense, but like… *quiet*.

In the soul.

That was a thing, right?

You're pretty sure that's a thing.

Because that's what you felt.

You ran your nails along his scalp.

The scruff of the main male character on the screen jogged your memory. "Yo, Cro, I just gotta ask: Who is that absolute *DILF* in that big portrait upstairs?"

"*What?"*

"You know, the giant picture of that scruffy DILF. Got like scars on his face, wind-swept hair. Like… y'know that fucking *DILF*. *The DILF.*"

He shifted to give you a confused look. "You mean that picture of Dualscar?"

"Is he like your troll dad or something?"

Cronus wrinkled his nose in disgust. "You mean like that whole daddy thing from human pailvids? Didn't realize you were into that that sort of... shit... me n' Dualscar? Kitten, you're killin' me."

"What the fuck's a pailvid?" You asked.

"You know... a pailvid? A concupiscent aid for when ya gotta let your bulge wiggle." When you just stared blankly at him he rolled his eyes and made a lewd gesture. "Videos for when you ain't got anyone fuckin' ya so you gotta fuck yourself. I know humans yank it, babe, you all have so many different porn sites it gets hard to keep track of 'em. Believe me, I've tried."

Oh.

Oh GOD.

You almost bowled over with your laughter. Your sides hurt. When you finally managed to quiet your laughing enough to be able to form words, you snorted out, "You watch human porn?" That threw you into another fit.

God when was the last time you'd laughed like this.

"N-no kink shaming intended," You gasped out between giggles. "You do you, just... you thought I meant like a daddy dom or some kinky shit when I said dad?"

"Well isn't that what it is? Because, baby, you can call me daddy anytime." He waggled his eyebrows but you just ruffled his hair a bit.

"No! And also *no.*" Your sides ached. "A dad is a male parent."

He just gave you a confused look.

"You know, someone who takes care of you while you're growing up... ideally. There's a lot of fluidity when it comes to human family units and unfortunately with our society the way it is-"

"Like a lusus?"

"I guess?" You shrugged. "That Dualscar dude your lusus or whatever?"

Cronus' expression soured. "You've already met my lusus, chief, and that bitter, drunk old bastard ain't it. He was *The Orphaner* for glub's sake. He went around *killing* lususes."

"Oh shit...." You frowned, "That's awful."

"Tell me about it." He grimaced, returning his gaze to the TV. "Pops 'n Eridan practically worship that piece of whale refuse. I get it, the Orphaner was important. Dualscar was important... but for Glub's sake do we need pictures of him everywhere? Gl'golyb is gone. The Condesce is gone. We ain't even on Alternia no more. We don't gotta keep licking his goddamn boots." His fins drooped.

"Why do they care so much?" You asked.

He gave what you're pretty sure was a noncommittal hum, resting his head on your chest.

"Okay," You replied, and ran your fingers through his hair. "No pressure. Just a couple of cool cats watchin' stupid movies." His tension evaporated when you mimicked his cheesy faux-Brooklyn accent.

The woman on screen chatted with an old bearded man who was without question, Santa. He winked at her and gave her some trinket "on the house" that would teach her about the spirit of Christmas or whatever. You're pretty sure you saw this one before, but honestly even seeing *one* meant you'd seen them all and you got pretty wasted whenever you watched these stupid things.

"I'm sorry for snapping at you before." He murmured after a while. You could feel his jaw move as he shifted around a bit.

"Apology accepted." Your other hand found his and you gave his head a reassuring pat. "I've never seen you that mad though.... Is that uhhhh....." You tried to form a cohesive thought in your alcohol addled brain, but gave up after a few moments deciding on mumbling out a stupid. "Do your friends do stuff like that a lot?"

Cronus kind of shrugged, "Not... Not like that, not a lot."

That sounded pretty fucking personal, and you probably shouldn't ask.

You *probably* shouldn't ask.

You almost definitely shouldn't ask.

"Do you want to talk about it?" You asked. *Goddamnit*

The toll hummed, the clicking sound coming from him getting a little lower. Enough time passed that you figured that probably meant no, and you went back to half-paying attention to the movie, but not a moment later you felt him shift again. "Why are you doing this....?"

"What?"

"Bein' nice 'n shit." He mumbled into the fabric of the hoodie you wore.

"I'm drunk and it's the holidays. Do you want me to stop?" You replied curiously.

He shook his head in response. You could feel his jaw opening and closing like he wanted to say something but couldn't quite find the words. He stared at the screen, his voice small when he finally spoke again. "You ever felt like you don't belong?"

You felt your chest tighten.

That....

That hit just a little too close to home.

"Yeah."

He wrapped his other arm loosely around your abdomen. You probably shouldn't have let him, but you were comfortable and it wasn't like you were cheating. It was just a friendly cuddle session with one of your newest friends in his dude cavern.

Drunk.

In the dark.

Watching romantic movies.

Keeping it real.

Nothing wrong with that at all.

He twined his fingers with yours.

"I just don't get what I did to make everyone hate me so much. Even when I was a wriggler... I was supposed to have some big destiny or some shit but no one believed me because, let's face it, it was a big load a' crap. But even... even my own lusus doesn't like me and he was supposed to be the one who chose me from the caverns. Like I just can't help but feeling like I'm not... I'm not supposed to *be* here. Which is *dumb* as *fuck* because where else am I supposed to be? There ain't anywhere else but here."

Something was scratching at the back of your mind, something that the Mailman had said about timelines and ripples.

"Everything just feels so...." Cronus trailed off, watching the woman on the screen buy a kid some hot cocoa or something. You settled further into the couch; your hand still combing through his hair. After a few minutes he still remained silent, though the soft clicking picked up again when you grazed by the bed of ones of his horns with your nail.

As the movie continued it was obvious that Cronus had no intention of continuing his sentence, and you honestly didn't know what to say and even if you did you weren't really sure it would help. What even constituted help anyway?

Besides, why should you even bother when you could watch the vague reflection of the movie off of his horns. God they were smooth. You'd never really noticed before. (Did he polish them? Was that something that trolls did?)

And before you could stop yourself you ran your finger down the edge of one, tracing from the tip down to the base.

Cronus went stiff.

"Sorry," You pulled your hand away. "Are they sensitive?"

"No." He breathed out. "Mostly just feels like pressure. You're good. You uh... you ain't gotta stop. Just wasn't expecting it 's all."

"Okay." You touched them again, admiring the texture on the pads of your fingers. He stiffened again before going limp against you.

Man you really hoped he wasn't getting off on this or something. But he wasn't moaning or anything so it was probably fine.

You managed to resist that stupid urge to lick and/or bite it. It wasn't sexual, honest to god. It was the same urge you got whenever you saw a cool rock or pretty dice or an exceptionally shiny leaf. You're pretty sure it would be exceptionally bad to have gone through with it this time though. Probably worse than when you were in a mineral shop looking at polished rocks. (Because Cronus was the horniest person you knew (pun intended) and there was no way he wouldn't take it the wrong way. Also licking people in general was pretty heavily frowned upon societally.)

His clicking increased in volume and you went back to idly scratching his scalp. "Y'know.... When I was younger I went on a roadtrip with my bro and we took a stop at the UFO museum in Roswell. I'm not sure if you've heard of it, but there was a huge thing about an alien ship crashing there and the government trying to cover it up, and it's a whole big thing. But I remember going through it and reading about how they picked up four bodies and flew them to Area 51. And it wasn't something that I really followed a lot growing up because I believed in aliens, yeah, obviously, but them coming and visiting us seemed far fetched." You snickered a little at that, combing through the hair of the alien who was... practically on top of you. (You should probably do something about that. Maybe... it wasn't like he was even doing anything though so....). "But that's neither here nor there, that's not really part of the story. Anyways, reports all mentioned that one of them was definitely alive, and it struck me as just... really sad, y'know? Like this little guy's so far from home and all of their friends are

dead and no one can understand them and I dunno where I'm even going with this but... it was just sad."

You really had no idea why you'd even mentioned it. You'd thought about that alien before... actually pretty frequently for about a year or two. How scared it must have been.

And maybe Cronus would have reminded you of it except that his friends were alive. But he was still very far from Alternia even though he seemed to like it here, and well.

Maybe you were feeling that human emotion called friendship for him.

And maybe you kind of pitied this shuckboy.

He knocked his horns against your shoulder, "So *that's* why you're bein' so nice to me. You got a guilty complex."

"Nah, I'm just a big softie. I didn't do anything to feel guilty about." You messed up his hair despite his protests.

Cronus looked up at you, mild irritation on his face. You reached out grasped his horn; His eyes widened immediately, but you just lazily wiggled his head back and forth. He let out a shaky breath when you let him go, staring at you for about half a minute before nervously turning his head back to the screen and settling against you again. His arms tightened around you.

It was strange how things worked out sometimes. You'd spent almost the entire party completely avoiding this asshole because you hated his guts and here you were in his basement hanging out, more relaxed than you had been in a while.

Cronus let go of you to stroke your cheek again in a downward motion, an odd expression on his face; Eyes wide as he stared at you. It was a little uncomfortable and a little too intimate despite the fact that you'd been tangled together for a while now. You put your hand on his and moved it to the top of your head instead. His brow furrowed. "Do... do you not like that?"

You hummed a little and shrugged. "It's uh... hmmm...."

He mimicked what you had been doing before by running his hands along your scalp. You couldn't help the little shiver that went up your spine. *God that felt good.*

And sure it was still kind of intimate, but you'd done this kind of thing with friends before so it wasn't like you were doing anything wrong. (When was the last time you'd done something like this though...).

(A lot longer than you cared to admit....)

(It had been a long while.... Probably since before you'd even started grad school.... Before you'd had your falling out with one of your besties.)

"Is this better?" He asked softly.

You nodded, relaxing into the touch, "Yeah."

Cronus grinned, ducking his and resting his forehead on your chest. The angle was a little weird with his arm partially obscuring your view of the movie. Something moderately interesting happened on screen and he stopped (you'd liked the touch a lot more than you were willing to admit), wrapping his arm around you again and settling in to watch the actors get into some sort of stupid fight.

"Do you want human drugs?"He asked after a while.

You made an inhuman noise.

"What?"

"Human drugs. Do you want some? I have some down here." He replied.

Now was your time to shine.

All of those anti-drug PSAs prepared you for this.

Just say *No,* kids.

"What kind?" You asked instead. (Fuck the authorities.)

He shrugged, "Y'know, the human kind. I got it from some punk looking dealer.... It's literally called drugs. It comes in a can."

You snorted. "Dude I'm pretty sure that's just that shitty soda brand with a lot of caffeine."

"Oh."

"I hope you didn't pay a lot for it."

He shifted uncomfortably.

"Oh my god how much did you pay for it?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

You snorted. "Well now I absolutely *have* to know."

"I'm rich so it's not like it broke me or anything...." He mumbled awkwardly, but at your insistent prodding finally said. "Two hundred human dollars...."

You're pretty sure you've never laughed so hard in your life.

What a dumbass.

Two hundred dollars for shitty soda.

You would hate him for being rich enough that spending that kind of money wouldn't kill you on the spot, but the situation was just too goddamn funny to do anything other than wheeze.

Your sides legitimately hurt.

And you thought to yourself... you might be starting to actually like this shuckboy.

Platonically.

In a very much friend way.

And not at all romantically because he was a sleazy asshole even if he looked incredible in tights (and you never thought about that at all. Ever. Obviously.)

"Jeegus, kitten, laughing at my misery like it's some kind of game.... So rude. I offer you human drugs which 's supposed to be a human bonding thing and you just laugh." Cronus pouted.

"Maybe next time do your research before you start buying drugs from random people. But at least now you have a funny story to tell people at parties." You tugged his horn lightly and you were pretty sure you heard his breath hitch.

His fingers curled against your side, and he shifted again. "My ancestor was executed for being an unfunny bastard and Meenah used to tell me that the clowns were coming for me next. I always thought I was untouchable because well... I was stupid. But I tried pretty hard after that anyway. Because if they could get the Orphaner then well...." The seadweller trailed off. "So thanks for laughin' I guess."

"That sucks, dude. I'm sorry." You scratched the bed of his horns and he practically melted.

"My other friends thought I should join the clown church because all I do is clown around though." You snorted at that one. "But... I know it sounds stupid because magic is fake as shit and even talking about it is for dumb wrigglers, but I think maybe.... Nevermind, it was a stupid thought I'll shutup."

"Dude it's literally just me. Don't even worry about shit. Who am I gonna tell? The fucking mycology department of like four people including everyone in the grad program?" Closing your eyes, you leaned back, listening to the background noise of the movie. "Besides. I already judged you pretty harshly before tonight, so I don't think you can get lower than that point."

"It was a stupid thought. Magic is fake anyways so it's not like it matters." He repeated.

“No, I’m pretty sure magic is real.” You replied after a moment. Half-serious, half-just to be contrarian. "It's real as hell and not fake at all."

"No it's not. Don't be an idiot." He shifted, head off your chest now. Probably looking at you, but you couldn't bring yourself to open your eyes. You were comfortable as all hell, and you were tired and still pretty drunk.

"People just misunderstand what magic is." His hair was soft but so dense as you ruffled it. You idly wondered what would happen if you pulled it, but he'd probably misinterpret that as something sexual knowing him. "It's definitely real."

"Kitten, look, magic ain't real. You're way too old to believe in that shit." He let go of you to gently pat you on the cheek with his cold hand. "I'm telling you this as uh... a friend."

You considered biting one of his fingers for a moment... but decided against it. "It's real." You murmured.

"It's not."

"Mmmmm pretty sure it is."

You could feel him fidgeting for a second, "It's fake... trust me. I um...." Cronus' voice was vary small as he said, "I don't want ya to be disappointed 'n find it out by like... the wrong way or somethin'."

"Cute." You couldn't help the grin forming on your lips or the faint warmth of your cheeks, and you opened one eye a crack to take him in.

God he was *heartrendingly* pretty.

(Too bad he was such a tool all... *most* of the time.)

He looked so somber and serious and concerned, his violet eyes watching you carefully with an expression that you could quite interpret in the low light... uncertainty maybe. Cronus' fins fluttered as you smoothed his hair back, fingers sliding down his face so you could trace a faint line of bioluminescence along his cheek.

You didn't have to have darkvision to know that he was blushing like mad as he leaned further into your touch. He closed his eyes as he mumbled out a, "You're real fuckin' weird, you know that right?"

You just patted his cheek; Then tentatively ran your finger along the edge of his fin noting how stiff the top was. Probably bone. But the membrane was soft and smooth and cool to the touch just like the rest of his skin. His lips parted slightly before he bit the bottom one. You grasped the edge of it between your fingers, not hard enough to pinch and it practically trembled underneath your touch. You rubbed a light circle along it with you thumb and his entire body shook.

Very interesting.

You ran the pad of your thumb along the flat plane back inward, his expression bordered the edge of pleasure, discomfort, and panic, his breath stuttering as you pressed down to test the flexibility of the thin skin. He was shivering almost violently, and you couldn't help but make the comparison of someone gently running the tip of their nail down the back of your neck to the small of your back.

Very, very interesting.

Wondering exactly how sensitive they were was definitely a lot more clinical than friendly of a thought though so before you allowed yourself to pinch down to see if it would actually hurt you withdrew your hand. You slung your arm leisurely over the back of the couch and returned to watching the movie. It was nearing the end, the characters must have already had their two-thirds mark *Oh, I'm in love* moment because the woman was on the phone with her boss.

Cronus let out a shaky sigh after a while. His fins flicked and in your periphery you could see his eyes blinking open. He shifted, resting his head on your chest again, "You didn't have to stop...."

You hummed noncommittally, stretching out a little more. And then you felt his hand on your knee.

That was... a little more intimate of a gesture than you should allow.

Yeah that was... more than friendly.

But he was an alien... it was fine.

It probably wasn't a romantic gesture in troll culture.... And it wasn't like he was hurting anyone.

It was fine.

His hand moved up your thigh.

Okay maybe this wasn't just a friendly gesture. You needed to stop this right now.

Cronus shifted again facing you again eyes boring into yours, biting his bottom lip again, his knee up against your thigh as his hand came up to stroke your face and curl in your hair. He leaned in, burying his face in crook your neck. "Let me be your boyfriend tonight."

O-oh Fuck.

You could feel his cool breath against your skin as he whispered out. "I know you miss him... s-so we can pretend, right? It ain't cheating if you're callin' out his name. I'll be quiet. Promise."

You grabbed his horn. You needed to stop this.

Why weren't you stopping this?

His other hand rested on the small of your back, his nose bumping against your neck. "It- It'll be like using a toy. It's not cheatin' if you're using one, right?"

Shit.

Your grip on his horn tightened, but you didn't move. How long had it been since you'd actually had a proper fuck...?

A thousand thoughts went through your head at once, scenarios playing out: Letting this happen... holding him close as he nipped and sucked at your neck; Shoving him back on the couch and riding him until he was a panting, moaning mess; The thought of getting down on your knees and seeing what exactly this bulge of his could do; His hands groping you; What those shark teeth would feel like if he bit down.

Y-You could blame it on the alcohol. (Pathetic.)

You swallowed, paralyzed, but he didn't attempt to go further than he already had.

It felt like an eternity, like the universe was waiting for you to do *something,* but in all reality it couldn't have been more than a few seconds.

And a weight settled on your shoulders... something deeper, more metaphysical than the weight of the man practically on top of you. There was a *decision-*

No.

That wasn't quite right. It was heavier than that.

There was a **DECISION** in front of you. Something more important than you had any right to realize.

And you knew with every fiber of your being that *this* was ***wrong*** .

You shoved him off.

You shoved him off of you with more strength than you realized you had and immediately stood up.

" *WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK, CRONUS!?"* You snarled at him . "I can't fucking believe you'd just- *eugh! What is wrong with you!? "*

You backed away, hands clenching and unclenching as you debated whether to beat the shit out of him or run. His eyes were wide and glassy as he looked up at you, mouth set in a grimace like he was experiencing the exact same hatred directed at himself that you felt toward him.

After the initial moment of shock, you turned and went for the door. It didn't matter where you went, it just couldn't be here (because truth be told, you were beyond disgusted with yourself that it took you so long to shove him off.... *(and even think about the possibilities)*).

"What's wrong with *me?* Where the fuck do you even get off on that, doll." The anger in his voice was palpable. "Last time I checked, *you* were the one getting all *handsy* and gettin' *me* all worked up. So don't go actin' like you're some kind a' saint!"

You swallowed.... *Oh.*

"What the hell do you want *from me, kitten!?"*

Oh Fuck.

You stopped in your tracks, hand hovering over the doorknob. You really should have asked before you'd started touching... *shit.* (And in hindsight the expressions he'd made when you'd been playing with his fins had perhaps been a little sexually charged....)

But it still didn't change the fact that at least verbally you'd made it abundantly clear up to that point that you had zero intention of sleeping with him. You bit your lip, hesitating for a moment before placing your hand on the door.

And you heard him make nearly the same sound as a deflating balloon, followed by him flopping on the couch. " *Please don't go.* "

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't."

" *Please don't."* Cronus repeated, voice impossibly small. " *I don't want to be alone* ."

You closed your eyes, cursing yourself for feeling bad for him. There was a reason he was alone. He *deserved* to be alone. (No he didn't. No one deserved that.) And *god* would you be lying if you said you didn't understand just what that felt like.

The isolation. The desperation. Everything clicked in a way that just hit a little too close to home.

Your hand held fast on the doorknob. You really should walk away.

"Look, I'm sorry for touching you inappropriately. It wasn't intended as a come-on... but what you did wasn't okay. At all." You replied after a moment.

" *I'm sorry.... Just please don't go....* " He whimpered. " *I'm so tired of being alone...."*

Fuck ....

And in that moment you hated him because in that moment you *knew* him. Maybe you couldn't fully get it because you were both aliens to each other, and maybe your emotions worked differently, but you knew him. And you knew you probably wouldn't be able to really hate him going forward.

You took a breath before speaking next, the words coming out heavily, "Sex isn't going to make you feel any less empty inside."

You really should walk away, but the thought of crossing their yard alone in the dark with that frankly terrifying mime walking around... and it wasn't like you could really drive home yet. With your luck you'd probably get pulled over and get a DUI; you couldn't afford that shit.

He was silent for a while, and you sighed, turning around. He was watching you with hopelessly lost eyes. "You don't know that."

His voice cracked and he licked his lips, looking back at the screen as the couple held hands and smiled and kissed, and he almost seemed to curl in on himself, eyebrows furrowing. He glared at you, face contorted into a snarl. "You don't know me! *You don't know shit !* You're in a relationship and you still ain't gettin' any action. Why the hell should I listen to anything you have to say on anythin'?"

You want to be mad at him. You know you should be mad at him. But all you could see when you looked at him was an animal with a wound that never healed right and you'd just prodded it. You sighed and leaned against the door, the credits rolling on the screen reflecting in his glasses. "I do know. Trust me. I know you a lot better than you think."

Cronus winced, eyes blinking very quickly like he was trying to stave off tears, anger melting into that scared, helpless expression that tugged uncomfortably at your heart strings and you shoved your hands in your pockets because fuck it... where else would you even go? (And the thought of leaving right now... felt *wrong* too).

"Cronus, I really want to be your friend. I can't offer you more than that."

"But I-"

You cut him off. "This isn't some sort of Hallmark movie where we fall in love by the miracle of Christmas magic. I need you to understand that. Okay?"

His fins drooped.

"I-...." He looked at you again, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. "Y-yeah. Okay. Fine. Just... please don't go yet."

You nodded your head and motioned for him to sit on the far side of the couch while you sat on the other. "And honestly, telling someone that they can call out a different name during sex isn't fair to you.... Sex isn't worth it if you have to devalue yourself. You should have a little more respect for yourself than that."

He stared at you peculiarly but didn't respond. You didn't really expect him to, but a confirmation that he understood what you were saying would have been nice. "Do you wanna watch another movie?" He asked after a short while.

"Sure," You replied, "But I think it would be for the best if we didn't go with anything romantic." He let out a nervous laugh.

Without that stupid, smug grin on his face, he really did look a lot like Harry Potter.... And while you knew you had promised not to bring it up, you couldn't help but asking, "Do you wanna watch Harry Potter? I know you have some like hardcore hatred for magic and what-not but like... I mostly just want to show you that I wasn't trying to be mean or anything... and it's kind of silly and cute. Although given JKR's descent into rabid TERF territory it does make watching it more complicated, y'know? Like it was something so important to me growing up but the author being an actual horrible person kind of changes the way it hits because I don't want to support her and her whole gender is biological thing when it very much isn't. Sex isn't even fully biologically based. I mean humans technically have a total of

seven different sexes if you look just at the genotype, and we're not even getting into karyotype tests because who has time for that far of a delve, and even then phenotypical expression can vary wildly from person to person-"

Cronus was looking at you like you had two heads and was incredibly amused by it. "This isn't exactly what I had in mind when I asked you to give me a lesson in human biology." But he was grinning with those stupid shark teeth of his and he didn't look like he was on the verge of crying anymore.

"Obviously I'm not gonna make you watch it because you have some god-tier level vendetta against even the word magic, but... I guess I just wanted to show you I wasn't trying to make fun of you haha...." You rubbed the back of your neck self consciously but he gave an exaggerated huff and roll of the eyes.

"Fine... we can watch your stupid magic movie but only because you're so desperate for it." You couldn't tell if he really was exasperated with you, or if he was just kidding. But you knew once you showed him he would Understand why you would make the comparison.

You grabbed the remote from its spot in the middle of the couch and put it on. Cronus watched the opening with a set grimace as though he were steeling himself for a fight, but he wasn't complaining.

You just leaned into the corner of the couch, curling into a ball, sinking into the throw pillows. His frown lessened as the movie actually began to play, eyes glancing furtively from the screen back to you as though he were waiting for some signal as to how he should react... or nervous at getting caught trying to look at you. Maybe both.

And then they zoomed in on the scar and he went stock still, the expression on his face was difficult to place, but it had a certain weight behind it. He reached up to touch his own, lips pursed as he watched the screen intently. He flinched as Harry was shoved around, face setting into an almost morbidly curious expression... the kind that people wore when they saw something distasteful but couldn't bring themselves to look away.

Cronus remained uncharacteristically silent, same stern look on his face until the characters began to speak of the Dark Wizard, *He Who Must Not Be Named,* and how he had given Harry that scar.

"Turn it off."

You complied, turning the tv off, leaving you in complete darkness except for the faint glow of his bioluminescence that seemed to pulsate. "You okay?"

He went silent once more for a long while and you wished you could make out more of him in the darkness, but he did seem to... maybe shake his head? You weren't fully sure.

"Who the fuck wrote this?"

You raised an eyebrow. "JKR... an awful person. I'm pretty sure I was just tell-"

"How the hell did they know?"

"It's a story... she made it up. That's kind of how stories work."

"*No* . You don't- it- it's not...." There was an edge to his voice like he was on the verge of a panic attack. "That's - " He breathed deeply, " *That's* ...."

"The scar, the great wizard destiny, th- the.... That's...." His voice petered off, but you could still hear his arrhythmic breathing.

And you felt something... shift in the atmosphere; as though the air itself were thicker (even though empirically you knew that was very unlikely), but it was... unsettling and you didn't like not being able to see so you turned the TV back on and put it on the main menu.

His fins were completely pressed down and back, folded into little more than stiff, little crinkles at nearly a flat angle. His eyes wide as he stared ahead, faintly lilac globules of water pooling at the corner. He sniffed a bit, blinking before forcing a smile and opening his mouth as if to say something then closing it immediately as little more than a faint, distressed noise escaped his throat.

Wow.

You were just really fucking this whole friendship thing up weren't you.

Friends weren't supposed to make friends feel like crap or ruin their night.

Especially at crispmass- (*Fuck) Christmas* parties.

You got up, moving to the corner section (the most perfect section of every couch ever) right behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. He seemed to flinch but didn't move away, and you pulled him into a hug. A solid hug. Not the kind that was so tight it felt your ribs might break (but something told you you probably couldn't hug him tightly enough to do that anyway), but the sort of of embrace that anchored you to the material plane, to the moment, because maybe it wasn't the same for trolls, but you knew it was something that worked for you. (You really hoped it wasn't a turn on or a come on in troll culture though because heavens knew that would probably just make it worse and that really wasn't your intention, but you knew the saying.... The road to hell was paved with them and boy had you been laying down that asphalt all night).

He froze. Not like a deer in the headlights or a kid finding out they had stage fright as soon as they saw the crowd watching them for the first time, but like a grape dropped in a vat of liquid nitrogen. Rigid, fragile, likely to shatter if you so much as touched it. So still you weren't fully sure his heart hadn't ceased to beat; Even his breathing had stopped. And an overwhelmingly sad thought flitted through your brain.

Had he ever experienced this before?

Had he ever received a positive touch in his life?

(After all, troll culture seemed to value strength over everything else. His entire household apparently worshiped someone they call The Orphaner who went around killing people for some god-awful reason).

Your arms tightened around him.

Had Eridan?

After what felt like an eternity Cronus finally melted, leaning back heavily into you. He couldn't hug you back because of the angle (which was probably for the best), but he placed his hands on your own and gripped them tight enough to be sort of uncomfortable but not tight enough for you to voice that discomfort. He let out a shaky exhale. You stayed like that for a moment before releasing him and settling more comfortably in the corner, and you gave one of his horns a single tug, pulling him back to you, his head resting just below yours so his horns weren't digging into you. Your arms snaked around his midsection.

His breathing returned to normal but his heart (hearts? honestly you weren't sure) was pounding hard enough you could feel it, but even that settled after a while.

And finally he spoke. "Promise you won't think I'm crazy?"

"Promise."

"When I was a grub I used to have... dreams.... But they were- I always felt like they were more than dreams because it was always the same setting: Of a purple world where if I looked up, the inky void above it stared back and whispered things to me. The same purple block. The same... the same angels. But these weren't like human angels, they were like giant slither-beasts with wings. And they would tell me things. About how the universe would die... and how I was supposed to somehow prevent it. Because I was going to become powerful one day, more powerful than even the Dark Magician 'n his minions set on destroying and consuming everythin', and I was going to be the greatest wizard in all of spacetime."

"They told me that I was the only one who could. It was my destiny as the Bard of Hope and the Dark Magician knew this too, that's why he sent his witch to kill me when I was a tiny grub. But she couldn't and left me with this scar instead. I know it's fake. I do. It was just some stupid shit I dreamed up when I was in stewing in pupation juice. But it felt so real.... Sometimes it felt more real than my life after crawlin' out a' my cocoon. There's a lot I don't really remember as a wiggler, but I remember a flash of light and the pain in my forehead. That story was just somethin' I made up to make sense of it or whatever, I know, but I wanted so hard to believe it was true." He trailed off, voice uncharacteristically wistful.

And maybe it was just the story but... you felt a jolt of excitement course through your gut. You weren't sure why it was so exciting. Maybe it was just because your new friend was opening up to you and it felt *good* when people were comfortable enough with you to confide things. *(But not usually exciting. Not really .)*

"But I was a stupid kid, y'know? And I just kept believing and believing even after the dreams stopped and my scar stopped hurting. My lusus was so convinced I was a lost cause

that he went and adopted another fuckin' kid! Do you know what that's *like*? And no matter what he'd do I just kept thinking, *'It's okay because one day I'm gonna save the entire universe and be a big* coddamn *hero and then everyone'll see'* and- and I'm just glad that people managed to knock some sense into my thick pan-protector before I did somethin' stupid I guess...." He certainly didn't sound glad. "Glad they taught me that magic is fake 'n dumb as shit...." A bitter laugh escaped his throat. "Imagine me... *me* a stupid wriggler being a big-shot magic wizard."

You hugged him a little closer, and picked your words very carefully. "It's not stupid, and you're not stupid for believing in magic...especially as a kid."

A shudder ran through him, and you rubbed soothing circles into his sides.

You wanted something.... *Needed* something from him, but you didn't quite know what it was. A tugging, an urging at the edges of your mind that.... didn't quite settle right.

"*I* still believe in magic, and I'm an adult who's already got two degrees under their belt...."

"For glub's sake, Kitten, I know you're tryin' to make me feel better, but you're just makin' yourself look dumb."

"I'm serious, Cronus." Your voice was firm. "Maybe the type of magic where you wave a wand and all your problems are solved isn't real, but that doesn't mean magic in and of itself doesn't exist."

He broke out of your grasp, sitting up and turning to face you, "*It's not.*"

"Cronus...."

He let out a huff, sneer twisting his lips. "And you know, Kitten. You know what the real fuckin' cherry on top was? Somethin' those stupid angels whispered to me. Something no one could ever know."

This.

"And like some sort of dumbass, even after I stopped believing, I still listened to their stupid rules."

A pang of excitement ran through you and that insistent scratching at the back of your mind, and you felt sick to your stomach.

"They told me his name. And they said that if anyone ever said it the Dark Magician would wake up and destroy the universe."

Say it.

"Magic ain't real and I can prove it."

Say it.

The excitement that seemed to threaten to light you on fire was overshadowed by a wave of abject terror. *Sumthin rly Big w/ a capital B cld b happenin 2nite now i dunno wat that sheeet iz yet but i can see dis timeline divergin n gettin all kindz a fxxxked up ya dig?*

"Cronus, I don't think you should say it." You swallowed thickly.

"Why not? It's not like anything'll happen."

T here are a lot of outside influences trying to get in .

It was like a ringing in your ears getting louder. (*Why were you so excited?)*

"I just think it's a really *really* bad idea." You sort of wanted to vomit, but it felt like you were rooted to this spot. Like someone stipulated that you be here at this moment in time.

And then it hit you. There was something in here. There was something trying to claw its way inside of you and maybe you were just having a panic attack but this... there was something about this that felt *different.*

"Yeah, well I have bad ideas all the fuckin' time, chief. And it's my knowledge, I can do whatever the hell I want, kitten."

It felt like the universe demanded that you sit t here and listen.

He let out another bitterly amused huff. "It was-"

But universal imperatives were stupid. (And you really hated this feeling).

You practically tackled him as you slapped your hands over his mouth, and it felt like something burst in your mind. But the scratching stopped. The excitement faded.

"Don't." You whispered, shaking your head solemnly. "Just... don't."

Your eyes implored his, they were glassy again, wide with shock. He sat stock still. Something heavy still hung in the air... but it was no longer oppressive.

You sort of just stared at each other for a long while before he cracked, the water pooling on his eyelashes finally spilling over.

"Are you still going to say it?" You asked hesitantly.

Cronus just shook his head and you removed your hands from his mouth, smoothing down his hair again and tentatively wiping away some of the wetness with the sleeve of his hoodie. He sniffed a bit and batted your hand away, haphazardly rubbing his palms over his eyes. His cheeks were still a little stained when he was finished, glasses smudged with tears and finger prints.

"You okay?"

He nodded.

It felt like you were alone again... or rather... alone together again. Whatever had gotten into you before felt like it was gone, and you were simultaneously exhausted and terrified and you kind of wanted to curl into a ball and sleep forever; but he looked even worse than you felt and if you were being honest you kind of wanted to wrap yourself around him and maybe protect him which was stupid because you're pretty sure he was a lot tougher than you.

You settled for patting his shoulder.

"Why are you like this?" He grumbled after a moment, burying his head in his hands. "You don't have to pretend like you believe in that shit...."

"I'm not pretending. Maybe it isn't true... maybe it is something you just dreamt up when you were a kid... but I just have a really bad feeling about it. And is it worth even fucking around to find out if it is or not? It's almost crispmass and it would suck if the world ended right now."

Cronus laughed a little at that, finally peeking at you through his fingers.

He reached out to pet your cheek again, it was still a little tacky from the tears. You were too tired to move or complain though. And he seemed to enjoy it because he let out a little giggle when you didn't stop him.

(You really hoped he wasn't getting off on this....)

You should probably ask.

"This isn't like... a sexual thing, right? Like you're not getting your rocks off on this, right? You're not like... getting a stiffie or anything...?"

"What? No... this is like one hundred percent pale 'n shit right now." His smile was soft.

"Isn't that the term you use for sex? I'm pretty sure you've used the word pail for sex." You still didn't move to stop him though. It actually was kind of nice even if his hands were cold. (And this was definitely not cheating territory).

"Hmmm they do kind of sound the same.... That's pail as in buckets which I know you aren't down right now but if you ever want to fill one up with me I'd be into it. Or uh... I know humans can be kind of wild... like maybe um... f-fill *you* up or something haha...." He cleared his throat, you could see the violet flush all the way to his fins, and he refused to meet your eyes. "Anyways.... I mean pale like... conciliatory ? Instead of concupiscent. Like soft emotions and stuff. Overlappin ' pale and pail is kind of... not something we usually do. .. even though it's not exactly *bad* or anything. " He fidgeted even more at that, his other hand scratching at the back of his scalp. "Like you're not *supposed* to... but what's - what's the harm in it.... It's not *wrong* to maybe feel...." He shrugged.

"Not that this is concupiscent or anythin'." He amended quickly. "Papping isn't part of pitch or flush relationships. Not that they couldn't be if you were into it or somethin' but that's a lot of blurring and-"

Cronus was now rambling and you couldn't quite follow, but he was getting more and more agitated with each word, running his hands through his hair.

"Hey," You said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "How about we crack open some of those drugs you were talking about?"

He stopped and looked at your thumb rubbing gentle circles on his shoulder and relaxed. "Yeah, lemme go get them."

He was such an asshat sometimes but... not all the time (and part of you felt like you should hate him for being such a jerk who kept pushing boundaries, but he was sort of growing on you. Like a one of those big dogs that wouldn't stop barking, and sometimes shit the carpet if he was ignored for too long, and no matter what would not stop jumping up to lick your face that was annoying but still managed to be awfully cute).

(And as long as you weren't having sex or making out or anything like that it wasn't cheating or anything. You were just friends. And even though you you were pretty sure he wanted to sleep with you, that was just normal Cronus. He wanted to fuck anybody who would have him).

He came back to the couch with a six pack of Drug brand soda. Graciously you accepted it (you were feeling pretty tired and you were kind of hoping the caffeine would help at least a little). It tasted like off-brand redbull that was entirely too fizzy and sweet, but it wasn't awful. Definitely not the worst thing you'd had tonight. (That failure of a hot toddy was absolutely repugnant).

Cronus leaned against you again, head resting on your shoulder as his free hand came up to pet your face again. "The real crispmass ain't for a few nights, right?"

You nodded.

"Do you wanna come over then too? Since it's supposed to be about like togetherness and people who care about you 'n all... and your boyfriend ain't around. You said it yourself... nobody should be alone on crispmass."

"Cronus, I really don't think that's a good idea. I mean...."

You swallowed, unsure of how to tactfully move forward when your phone rang giving you the perfect out. The ringtone was unmistakably the one you'd set for Phil and you told Cronus, "Sorry I have to take this real quick."

You nudged him off, standing on unsteady legs and moving to the bathroom and closing the door before picking up. "Hey, Phil."

"Hi, babe."His deep voice came through the speaker putting you simultaneously at ease and filling you with something a little uncomfortable that felt a bit like indegestion. "Just wanted to check up on you and see if you'd gotten home yet."

"Oh, I actually haven't left yet." You replied, checking the time. It was a little after eleven... the party would be wrapping up soon... most people would be starting to leave. "I'm still a little drunk, and I uh... just had some drugs."

"Look at you cutting loose. And here I thought I was the partier in this relationship." He chuckled a bit.

"I know how to have a good time... sort of." You sniped back, but it was lighthearted.

"Says the workaholic. When was the last time you've done anything fun? Halloween?" Phil teased, but you couldn't help but wince. He wasn't exactly wrong. You did have a tendency to put work and your degree first....

You just laughed a little in response.

"Is it at least the good kush?" He asked after a few seconds.

"Always."

"I'm glad you're having fun." His voice was earnest and something settled in the pit of your stomach. "Really. I was sort of hoping we could have a spontaneous date night... the fam's all out of the house tonight visiting my uncle so no interruptions, but it seems like you're kind of tied up. Unless you wanted to maybe get an uber or something? Or even facetime... I haven't seen your cute face in a hot minute."

You bit your lip, "Sorry, I'm kind of with friends right now."

"I completely understand. Don't get too high though... I wanna make sure you get home safe."

"Y-yeah." You weren't lying. Caffeine was technically a highly addictive stimulant.... Drugs was full of it. Sure maybe it wasn't exactly a party drug material but....

"I'll let you get back to the party. I love you."

You froze up, jaw working without a sound, and he let out a frustrated huff.

"You know Christmas is coming up... a little verbal present would be kind of nice."

You swallowed, willing your voice to work. "You know I care about you. A lot. I just...."

There was silence on the other end. Phil's irritation was practically palpable. "I'm trying to be patient. I really am. I get that you have difficulty with it... but.... Fine, whatever. It's fine. Just... enjoy the rest of the party okay?"

I'm sorry. Was what you wanted to say, but you just managed out, "I will. I... cherish you."

Phil let out a tired, but fond chuckle. "Take care of yourself, babe. Stay safe."

"You too."

The call ended without much fanfare, and that sort of uneasy feeling returned.

But it wasn't like you were doing anything wrong. There was no reason for you to feel guilty about anything. You weren't *doing* anything.

You looked yourself over in the mirror, noticing a mostly empty bottle of Jack perched on the shelf.... You really shouldn't. It was a bad idea. It was an awful idea... but you reached for it and took a swig. No more than a shots worth... just something to.... (You really didn't want to finish that thought).

You put it back and drank some water from the tap to get the taste out of your mouth and because you knew if you didn't you'd be in for a nasty hangover tomorrow morning. After about five minutes (you had checked your phone to make sure), you dried off your hands and exited.

You looked at Cronus who was most definitely watching you, but the reflection of the tv screen in his glasses obscured his eyes. God this was awkward.... But you weren't gonna lie... you'd been having kind of a nice time, and you really didn't want to leave because honest to god the thought of walking through their yard when there was that creepy mime.... (You were still a little shaky from that overwhelming feeling of something alien worming through your mind too).

You went back and sat back down next to him. "Sorry about that." He just gave you a lazy smile.

"Don't even worry about it, chief. I hope you told him about my threesome idea though. We gonna make a Cronus sandwich?" He waggled his eyebrows and you shoved him.

"Gross."

He just placed a hand over his heart, "Worried he'd leave you for me? The most gorgeous and sexy man in the entire world?"

You just snorted, scooting back over to the corner portion of the couch. "Something tells me you two aren't each others' type." Pretending not to notice the way his face fell, you continued, "You're very different people. Do you, uh, wanna watch another movie? If I'm not like... imposing on your hospitality by still y'know... being here?"

Fuck you really should not have had that Jack.... You were probably only an hour or two from legally being able to drive before you'd drank it.

He snickered. "Kitten, if you were imposin' I'd let you know. Very vocally and bodily. And yeah I'm down to watch another movie that's not about magic or anythin' stupid like that."

"You got it, chief," You replied with a smile. "Something unromantic and unmagical."

You put on Home Alone, leaning back and pulling Cronus to you again. He offered no resistance as he settled against you, horns on either side of your neck as you rested your chin on his head. His rumbling clicking returned as you wrapped your arms around him.

God he was fucking heavy... and his hands were cold as he twined his fingers with yours (but it was kind of nice considering they kept it a billion degrees in their home and you were getting kind of hot anyways).

This was nice.

"So what'd Phil want?"

"That's none of your business."

You couldn't see him but you knew he was probably pouting. "Fine... jeegus kitten. If I didn't know any better I'd say everything ain't as peaches and dairy as-"

"Good thing you don't know better then." You interrupted him, giving a sharp tug on his horn.

He let out a strangled "Y-yeah good thing, chief."

"And for your information, everything is just fine with me and Phil, so don't get any ideas."

"You got it, boss." He breathed out.

You released his horn and ran a hand through his hair. "Good boy." Cronus shivered in response, taking a sharp breath in. You went back to watching the hijinks of Kevin on the screen and Cronus leaned heavily against you. "We're not gonna discuss my relationship, okay?"

He just nodded. There was blissful silence from him as you both settled in, watching it together. His fingers fidgeted against yours, tapping against your knuckles lightly.

About twenty minutes into the movie he spoke again. "You really think magic's real?"

That threw you for a loop, and you took a moment to gather your thoughts.

"I mean you're supposed to be smart 'n shit, and your way too old to believe in that sort of stuff...." He mumbled.

"Well..." You started, "I don't believe in waving a wand around and casting spells from nothing, but yeah. Magic in and of itself is real."

He didn't respond.

"Okay so... a sunset is caused by the refraction of light as the sun moves out of view and the light has to pass through more levels of atmosphere to reach your eyes so it looks red and orange and yellow because those are the longest wavelengths and travel best through it. How is that not magical? Or even your body.... You're alive. There are trillions of cells making up your body each with its own set of purposes and they do it. So many things can go wrong, and sometimes they do, but for the most part those trillions of cells operate and live and grow and die and are replaced continuously and your body just... continues to function as a single entity. Proteins bend and fold and carry different molecules to different parts of the cell. Chemical reaction generate electricity powerful enough to keep you running. You're

constantly processing information from the environment around you and reacting to it and growing and learning even though there are trillions of little bitty discrete cells in every inch of your body (I'm sort of mostly assuming that because you're a multicellular organism that most of the functions are the same).... And even if you don't want to look at just biology, look at technology. Right now we're watching on a glass screen a bunch of pixels running on a program reading a file that it downloaded from the internet from some server miles and miles away via wireless communication that has to be interpreted into electricity and run down wires and communicate with satellites."

"I hate to break it to you, kitten, but that ain't magic. That's just normal stuff."

"That's only because you're limiting your purview of magic to something minuscule and plebian. Show this kind of stuff to someone from two hundred years ago and they'd burn you at the stake for being a witch. Because even though we can replicate and explain it, just because we have names for it... it's still magical as fuck, dude. Magic is all around us, you just gotta widen what your concept of magic is." You paused for a breath and pull your thoughts in from flying away and scattering, "And... and even speaking is just vibrating the molecules around you.... And we know that vibrations are what control a lot of different matter so... making them vibrate a specific way could end very poorly. So... I think it's a really good idea to never say that name out loud. Just... just in case. Okay?"

"For you? You got it, babe." He whispered back.

"But yeah... I just think that magic vs science is just kind of a flawed concept because they're kind of the same thing... y'know?"

You were met with more silence and you werent sure if it was him being thoughtful or just respectful enough to not call you an idiot, but his chilly hands tightened around yours and held them close to his stomach.

"That's.... Cod you're real fuckin' weird."

"Maybe, but I'm pretty okay with that." You mumbled out through a yawn.

Man you were really getting tired.... You should probably drink more soda, but you'd left it in the bathroom and Cronus was heavy on top of you (and you were pretty comfortable) and you didn't feel like making him get up to get your drink.

After a while he mumbled out something that sounded like, "Is it because I'm a troll?"

You let out an inquisitive hum for clarification but were just met by a quick "nevermind."

On screen Kevin spoke with his neighbor for the first time as they discussed fear and Cronus mentioned something about really liking the harmonics of religious architecture. You closed your eyes, just listening to the sound of his voice as he spoke about music and sawtooth waveforms and what sort of cool vibes he could create in an acoustic environment like that.

And between the pad of his thumb rubbing softly over the back of your hand and the softness and excitement of his voice as he rambled and the warmth of the room, a thought nestled

itself at the edge of your mind.

There was nowhere you'd rather be.

Chapter End Notes

The description of the Christmas party outfit is based off of a lovely drawing by punpunichu (I don't know how to link stuff here... one day i may figure it out)

Also feel free to find me on tumblr I'm @pumpkinofthedale :3

Sometimes Life is Feeling Like a Poached Egg

Chapter Summary

Navigating your relationship with Cronus after the crispmas party complicates your already busy and difficult life.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long, my life's kind of been all over the place. I can't believe how much this story has exploded and how much people have liked it. I love all of you so fucking much it's not even funny. Seriously.

Fanart, translations into other languages, the sweetest comments ever.... I'm just so floored. This is amazing. You guys are amazing and I really hope you enjoy the chapter.

It was warm; almost uncomfortably so. A heavy, comforting weight rested on your chest and collarbone, something very rigid digging into your shoulder. Your mouth was dry, but your head wasn't throbbing which was nice. A little sore, sure, but not the pounding, sick to your stomach, overwhelming headache that typically came after a night of drinking. You inhaled deeply and felt someone's arms tighten around you.

You smiled softly, squeezing them back as you felt yourself slipping back into sleep.

They nuzzled into your clavicle, that awkward, jagged weight digging into your shoulder wiggling as well. And then that weird object was no longer digging, instead rested comfortably.

Wait.

You had been at a party last night.

You had been at a party last night and you couldn't remember driving home, and your apartment was never *this hot during winter.*

You took a moment to take stock of the situation: You still had all your clothes on, which was good at least, but you were very much on your back, wrapped up in someone's arms. The last thing you remembered was watching Home Alone with Cronus while he had rambled about music theory.
You knew even before you opened your eyes who it had to be, and you probably would have

freaked out if you hadn't spent a good chunk of last night with that hot mess (and perhaps if you had a little more wits about you, you were only just waking up after all).

He appeared to still be asleep; expression unguarded from what you could make of it. There was a blanket on top of you both (though you could honestly do without, you felt like you could easily overheat with how hot they kept their hive) that you didn't remember having, so that was probably his doing.

And you stared up at the ceiling debating whether or not you should wake him or try to go back to sleep because you were still kind of tired, and probably way more relaxed than you should have been after realizing you'd spent all night cuddling with an obnoxious, self-absorbed, hot mess of an alien fish man. Because it had felt nice.

You felt... nice.

Like all of the static and pushing and prodding and fly-away thoughts were quiet.

Less anxious.

(That was probably the Oxytocin talking).

You finally decided *Fuck it* and closed your eyes again. The world could wait a little while longer.

You did not know how long you had been asleep for this time, but you could feel the tangibility of your dream slipping away. Which kind of sucked because it had been an interesting one; Something about working at an aquarium with a feisty arapaima who kept splashing visitors....

When your eyes finally fluttered open you were met with a sight that stopped your heart in your chest.

Cronus was staring back at you, face unguarded; a gentle smile on his lips, eyes still heavy with sleep. "Hey," His voice was low, a little hoarse in the way voices are right when someone wakes up and *fuck*...

Something about it made you feel so incredibly vulnerable, and all you needed to do was say a quick "hey" back, but your words stuck in your throat... you were *soft.*

You felt so *soft* for him... soft and fragile like a poached fucking egg.

"H-hey," You finally managed to whisper.

He grinned that kind of grin that covered his whole face and made his eyes squint and he reached out his hand toward your face. You shied away, meeting his hand with your own and curling your fingers around his because it was all too intimate and you knew if he touched you he'd puncture that fragile egg white and your yolk would run out and make a golden gooey mess and... and.... He just kept smiling at you, chin resting on your chest.

Cronus let out a contented sigh, squeezing your hand and laying his cheek against you. "You're so warm." He murmured into the fabric of your... or rather *his* hoodie. In the soft light filtering in through the small window you could see his blush. "Like my favorite sun-rock back when I was a wriggler... Used to go lay out on it and read every evening just after sunset. My lusus hated when I'd try to learn spells at home so I'd sit and practice them on my rock... not that anything ever came of that." Nuzzling into your clavicle his arm tightened around you. "But you're so soft."

He looked up at you again from under his dark lashes. "So warm and soft and perfect."

You struggled to find words, you heart beating so hard in your ribcage you were positive there was no way he couldn't hear it with his head pressed to your chest like that. If anything his blush was a deeper purple now. He let go of your hand to thread his fingers through yours and you were pretty sure you were going to die. You were going to have a heart attack because vulnerability wasn't something you did.

That was for other people.

People with more time.

People with more to give.

People who....

People who weren't you.

You let out a shaky breath then sat up a bit. Cronus of course pouted a little before asking very earnestly. "You feelin' okay? Are you hungover? Do you need anything?"

You nodded, "Could I have some water?"

"Of course." He was quick to reply, sliding off of you. He bent over to place a lingering kiss to your knuckles before bounding out of the room leaving you a flustered and flushed mess.

You needed to get out of here.

You needed to get out of here as fast as you could.

Holy shit you needed to leave.

You hopped up off the couch, fleeing to the bathroom as your stomach lurched. This was bad. This was very bad. You knelt over the toilet for a moment wondering if the nausea was going to actually amount to something then sat at the edge of the overlarge tub and checked your phone when it didn't. Two new messages from Phil and about twenty texts (That was of course an exaggeration, it was actually only five mostly consisting of "Just wanted to make sure you got home okay")... you groaned, running a hand through your hair.

How were you going to explain this to him? *"Hey, babe, sorry for not replying I was too busy cozying up with that dude I keep complaining to you about. Also I slept with him but we didn't have sex so that makes it okay."*

God what a fucking mess.

Sure maybe you hadn't been cheating but it still felt like it was on the precipice of what was considered decent (but he was so beautiful and you hadn't felt that relaxed in such a long time). It was okay that you felt that way though, right? This attra- this softness you felt was purely physiological... it was just the side effect of the oxytocin released during the prolonged physical contact.

It didn't mean anything.

You were so wrapped up in your head and headache that when you heard a gentle, "Here, I got you some water, and I know you didn't ask for 'em but I got you some painkillers too if you want 'em," you almost lost your balance and toppled over into the tub.

You looked up at him and he handed you a glass of water and a bottle of pills. "Thanks." You tried to give him an easy smile but you were pretty sure it looked more like a grimace.

Cronus sat down next to you as you sipped your water, reading the bottle's information to make sure you weren't poisoning yourself by ingesting something that was toxic to humans. And then reread it several more times to avoid looking at the troll next to you.

He pet your head.

"You seem awfully chipper for someone who spent most of last night drunk." You finally broke the silence.

He just snorted, "I really didn't get that drunk. In fact I'd say last night was the least drunk I've gotten this week."

You rolled your eyes. Stupid rich pretty boys and their parties....

You didn't realize you had said out loud until he laughed.

"Yup...I keep uh-... keep getting invited to parties. That's me." Cronus gave you a wry smile, that didn't quite meet his eyes.

He went to take your hand but you shied away, quickly busying them with opening the medicine bottle but your hands were shaky and your head was foggy and after what seemed like forever Cronus took it from you. You kind of wanted to cry.

He handed it back to you and you took just one tablet like the instructions said.

Cronus kept trying to touch you while you finished your water; A hand on your arm, a brush of his knee against yours, his head on your shoulder. You managed to dodge most of it and he pouted a bit, but he didn't stop his efforts and finally you caved when he put his arm around your waist and pulled you flush to his side. You were tired. Tired and hungry and nauseous and your head hurt and it was too hot in their house but his shoulder was cool against your temple and it was *nice.*

"I have to go." You said after a while.

"Or you could stay." He nuzzled the top of your head. "And I could make you a nice pile and then we could-"

"No." You didn't look up from the empty glass in your hand. "I think it would be best if I left."

"At least stay for breakfast? We have processed gr- cereal. Major munchies and some boring ones I think. Or I could- I could make you cluckbeast ov- eggs. I could make you eggs and um... toasted grublo- bread."

You kind of wanted to just leave, but food sounded really good right now. The grumbling in your stomach made the decision for you and you mumbled out, "Fine."

Cronus let out a giddy little giggle. Neither of you made any move to get up.

"... Did you just sniff my hair?"

"Wha- no." He protested, "I would never. I can't believe you would accuse me of somethin like that, kitten."

Yeah... He definitely did.

You should have been mad. It was socially considered weird and not something that you should encourage, but you honestly couldn't bring yourself to care that much.

Eventually you stood up and he pouted, but tugged you back along to the kitchen.

You sat at the island, watching him make a ridiculous amount of toast (some slices more burned than others) and about a dozen fried eggs, most of which looked pretty unevenly cooked, before sitting across from you, fixing you both a plate. You couldn't really stomach more than the toast and you had that uncomfortable memory of doing this before with different people (usually accompanied by very awkward silence).

But Cronus chattily filled the time, eating the food like he had a bottomless void instead of a stomach. He placed his hand over yours and squeezed it, smiling at you. It was sickeningly domestic and you had to fight the urge to get up and automatically flee because you knew if you moved too quickly your headache would come back and you may actually throw up.

You drank your fill of orange juice and by the end of your meal you were feeling marginally better (though increasingly anxious). You grabbed your eggnog sweater which was dry and kind of gross and were headed out the door when you gestured to the borrowed hoodie you were still wearing, "I'll wash this and bring it back, I promise."

He rubbed the back of his neck, a deep purple flush on his face. "You can keep it. Think of it as a crispmass present. You look really good in m-... The color looks good on you."

"Oh... Thanks. You don't have to though, I don't really need any gifts."

His face fell a little. "But I want you to have it. Besides this is a better gift than that gross drink you gave me yesterday so now we're even but I'm obviously the better gift giver."

You couldn't help the laugh bubbling in your gut, and you nodded.

It was a nice gift. Practical. Comfortable. Warm.

Cronus practically beamed. You didn't realize it was possible for him to blush even more, but it spread to his fins which had begun to flutter like little bat wings.

You turned to leave but he grabbed your wrist and pulled you into a hug, the kind with an awkwardly light pressure like he didn't know quite how much force to exert. But you were stupidly touched because you hugged him back tightly without a second's hesitation.

He rested his chin on your head and murmured out. "We should do this again sometime soon."

You pulled away without answering.

You didn't quite know what to say. On one hand you had enjoyed watching shitty movies with him, on the other hand you just... didn't have time to make it a common occurrence.

"I'm an incredibly busy person, Cronus... but I suppose if there is a time where I would be able to get together, a *friend* hangout could be nice." Was what you finally settled on, putting extra emphasis on the *friend* bit. (Truth be told, you were a bit afraid that he was taking all of this a lot more... *seriously* than he should).

He pursed his lips a little, "Well, I hope that's soon because I had a lot of fun last night, and I thought maybe you did too."

You sighed, but gave him a tired smile, "Yeah, I did. Last night was fun."

You stepped further outside and he watched you from the doorstep looking incredibly torn as though he were trying to decide whether to follow you or to go back inside where it was nice and warm. "I'm glad." He shivered a little and you stepped further away. "Happy crispmass, kitten."

"Happy crispmass, Cronus." You nodded before heading out.

You could still see him with his face pressed against the window when you reached your car and you gave him a little wave, driving back to your home.

Back to reality.

When Phil had told you that he'd gotten you a gift (even though you had vehemently insisted that he didn't need to get you anything) you had gotten kind of excited. Spending Christmas very much alone in your dinky apartment kind of sucked…. Okay it *really* sucked. It sucked so much and you were very much looking forward to getting his gift. You expected maybe something heartfelt that he had drawn… or maybe a homemade video…. Or maybe even a new video game (the ridiculous shitty kind you'd get for under five bucks during a sale because they were awful and no one wanted them but were a lot a fun).

So when you opened the text from him with a link, you couldn't help the little spark going through your stomach.

Oh.

Oh….

Your face fell when you followed it.

He had gotten you a digital amazon gift card. You were grateful of course (sort of) but of all the things to get you….this sparked the least amount of joy possible. (And if you were being completely honest between this and receiving no gift at all, you probably would have preferred to have gotten nothing at all).

It was like he didn't even *know* you sometimes. You had told him many times that you hated amazon. You hated everything it stood for: the commercialism, the greed, the poor working conditions that bordered on dystopian, the monopolization and whittling away at people's trust in unions. Sure, you understood the convenience aspect, but most of the items they sold could be found with other vendors for the same price and just…. You didn't fault people for buying from them when they had no choice, but you felt pretty strongly about it.

And such a generic gift card felt so hollow coming from your boyfriend of over six months now, and he'd been your friend for years before that….

It just felt… shallow.

And you felt shallow for feeling ungrateful which just made you feel worse. If he was going to go the lazy route you wished he had at least just paypaled you the money so you could buy gas and groceries.

But you kind of just wished he'd made you a mixtape or slideshow of pictures or something that didn't cost him the amount of money he'd paid for the gift card. You almost wondered if it was his petty way of showing you he was upset at you for still not having told him… you l-… you lo-… y'know those three little words that were expected at this point in your relationship that he really wanted you to say.

No… no you were taking the gift in bad faith. He had spent a lot of money on it… if he were being petty he would have gotten you nothing at all.

You debated whether to express your disappointment or not before deciding, no that would be pretty fucking rude, so you just told him a quick, "Thank you, you shouldn't have spent so much on me though. Something simple and homemade would have sufficed ♥" and hoped it didn't sound as passive aggressive as you felt.

You looked over at you desk chair and the hoodie draped over the back. The one that Cronus gifted to you… and silently wondered if his invitation to spend Christmas day with them was still open. You were pretty sure it was. Not that you were going to take him up on it of course. (Though if you were being completely honest with yourself you kind of wanted to).

You opted to put on the hoodie instead. It was cold in your apartment.

It was strictly practical and in no way sentimental and the fact that it smelled kind of nice had nothing to do with the decision either because you didn't feel any strong way about it. It was just comfortable wearing oversize clothing especially in cold weather.

You'd had a video chat with your family and later on in the day another chat with Phil who didn't ask you about the hoodie which you were quite grateful for (not that he even should have, it wasn't like it meant anything or was particularly noteworthy). And you put on some Christmas movies, cracked open the bottle of tequila that had been sitting on top of your fridge for forever, watching and drinking with Phil. It was nice.... but when the call ended, you were all the more acutely aware of how lonely your bed felt.

When you arrived outside Eridan's hive once more two weeks later, before you even finished parking your car, you could see Cronus' face smooshed up against the glass of the window; Not even bothering to hide the fact that he was very much waiting for you.

It was *flattering*. You should have felt flattered because this was your friend who was very excited to see you, but you felt an uncomfortable weight in your gut that reminded you a lot of indigestion even though you hadn't eaten anything to cause it.

You hadn't had a tutoring session with Eridan the week between Christmas and New Year because his school was on break and to be honest you kind of needed a break too. Sure, you'd had fun with Cronus that night, but that was a one time thing; You had been drunk. You'd been drunk and compromised and you couldn't bring yourself to face him again....

But you were fine now. Everything was fine and sorted and just fine and sure, you'd let your guard down and been vulnerable and emotionally intimate with him, but that wasn't you. That poached egg feeling wasn't you, it had just been a byproduct of the extensive physical contact. (You told yourself this multiple times per day which made it true.)

You didn't even have to bother knocking on the door. You weren't so much invited in as pulled in, the door shutting quickly behind you to keep the cold air out. He went to hug you but you managed to slip out of his grasp with a quick, "Hello to you too, Cronus."

You kept your voice level and gave him an awkward smile and gestured with your full (by design) hands hoping to imply that that was the reason you couldn't really touch him... or bear to be touched. He'd been vulnerable with you, you didn't want to ruin that sort of closeness for him.

"Did you have a good crispmass, kitten?" He asked, reaching to take one of the binders from your hand but you sidestepped and hurried over to the dining room.

You nodded, setting up the workspace. "It was okay."

A light, small talk kind of conversation... yeah. Yeah you could do this. You gave a mental sigh of relief.

"I missed you." The smile he gave you was soft, intimate. A weird sort of smile that made your heart do a funny flip that you didn't like.

You didn't quite know how to respond, but fortunately Eridan's timely arrival saved you from having to. "You ready to get started?" You asked him far too hastily which your young ward had noticed because he glanced between you, gaze scrutinizing.

"You're acting weird." He stated bluntly, eyes narrow. "Why are you acting weird."

Cronus looked like he was about to say something and it took every muscle in your body not to elbow him in the ribs and hiss at him to keep his mouth shut. So you beat him to the punch.

"My new year's resolution was to be nicer to people."

"Sure. That's it." Cronus gave you a conspiratorial wink.

You were going to kill him. You were going to kill him and bury his body where no one would ever find it, and the only person who would care was you and you would sure as hell take that to your own grave.

Eridan just gave a suspicious hum and pushed past Cronus to sit down at the table. You followed suit, opening your mouth to begin but stopping when you realized the older troll had sat down as well. Chin in hand, he just stared at you with a goofy smile that made you altogether too flustered because it was *sweet* and *dopey* like a fucking cartoon. You wanted to smack him.

"Cronus if you're going to stay for the lesson, I'd have to charge you for my services." You told him, hoping that at least he would leave the room to let you do your job in peace.

But of course he just reached into his pocket to pull out his wallet, a little pout on his face. "How much, chief?"

Eridan put a stop to that at once by whipping out what looked like a massive space gun and brandishing it with a hiss at his older counterpart. "This is *my* math tutor. Go find your own."

You gave the gun a panicky look and made yourself as small as possible in your chair.

Cronus for the most part seemed unfazed, just rolling his eyes. "Ugh, *fine*. I'll get out of your stupid wriggler hair."

He absconded to the next room where he sat on the couch to watch you, but squinted looking altogether thoroughly dejected.

It took several minutes after the gun was dismissed for you to shakily exhale, and you were pretty sure you sounded like a deflating balloon. You hoped you didn't look as panicked as you felt.

He sat down very primly, picking up a pencil and looking at you expectantly. "Let's start."

You gave him a tight-lipped smile that you were positive was more grimace than anything else.

Eridan just gave you a bored look.

"What? It's not like I was even gonna kill him. If I was gonna do that I would've done it long ago. Legally I would have been well within my rights after all," He threw his withering gaze at the couch Cronus' head was peering over.

"Maybe... threatening people with a gun isn't good either way?" You replied nervously.

Eridan groaned. "Cod humans are so soft it's disgustin'."

You kind of wanted to ask him if he was still seeing his therapist, but you also didn't want to misstep now that you knew this kid had an actual gun on his person at all times (probably).

"I ain't even killed anyfin since we landed on this stupid backwater planet." He pouted, "And I have to be nice to miscreants like him all the glubdamn time. I'm so fuckin' sick o' it!"

Tentatively you reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "It'll be okay. Let's take a couple of deep breaths, that sound good?"

Eridan had sense enough to look contrite as he muttered out, "Now you just sound like my therapist...." But he did as you asked.

After a few moments he finally settled all the way down, his fins lowered. "I shouldn't have snapped."

You nodded, just patting his shoulder.

"I...." He started, (you mentally prepared yourself for a long session that was more therapy than math because apparently that was your job now... being the person trolls looked to for emotional regulation. Because you definitely had a degree in troll psychology and not botany....) then sighed. "Used to understand things. It was simple. Just cull the undesirables, put gutterblood trash in their place, hunt lusii to feed to Gl'golyb. And sometimes I'd feel stupid things but I ain't ever needed to think about it or talk about it because the empire had certain standards.... I thought things would be different here and they are but I thought maybe, just *maybe* I could try things out and not feel ashamed. But the same stupid rules apply here except there's even more of them."

"What sort of rules?"

"Just social rules like how I can dress and stuff but it's fine." He looked down at his worksheet looking a lot less than fine.

"Did something happen at school?"

"I tried wearing one o' my nice skirts out because my stupid therapist told me that it would be okay. My lusus warned me people would think I looked ridiculous, but I felt good and plenty of people complimented me because let's face it I was luminous and effervescent but then

some stupid human called me... some derogatory human words." Eridan threw his hands up. "I'm not allowed to fuckin' cull humans! It's just a fuckin piece of cloth. It's not like I'm some contemptible degenerate with a human fetish." He cast a very dirty look over in Cronus' direction, but the older troll was no longer there. "I just want to wear what I want to wear. I feel like that isn't asking for some insurmountable thing."

Oh.

Oh... .

"There will always be awful people out there." You responded, "But there's usually more good than bad, and being true to yourself is important. I'm sure you looked lovely." You gave him a gentle smile. "You can't let people like that rule your life because it's *your* life to live y'know? If looking or dressing a different way makes you more comfortable there's no shame in it."

"Exactly! It's just fabric. So what if I wanna wear clothes that aren't 'masculine'. Gender dichotomy is just made up hoofbeast shit... not that I'm sayin' that I'm... questioning or anything." He added much too quickly (and pretty unconvincingly), tugging at his scarf. "I just like the way certain styles feel."

You nodded. "There's no shame in exploring things."

You could have sworn you saw him blush a little bit, and he cleared his throat. "Yes, well...." Honestly it didn't surprise you much when Eridan started talking about the play his school was putting on after that, and how he had been cast as one of the leads. He was the most dramatic person you knew in both an affectionate and a derogatory way (even if he was ready to whip out a gun at a moment's notice which was frankly terrifying).

But it was nice hearing him talk positively about something other than crushing his enemies at school, or about how much he hated people... (God that kid had a chronic negative outlook on life... but it was okay, he was doing better, getting therapy, and you remembered The Mailman saying you had a good influence on him too). Apparently it was a comedy too, something lighthearted that he could hopefully benefit from.

Most of the tutoring session consisted of him going on and on about it and you trying to wrangle him back in, but you didn't mind too much, and it seemed like he sort of needed someone to talk about it. Eridan had made a comment about his lusus saying it was beneath his royal stature. It seemed to have.... very exacting standards for the two of them, but it wasn't your place to intervene and he already had a therapist already to help him with that anyway.

How could you deny him this excitement?

You couldn't.

You wouldn't.

And when your session ran late, you only had to politely remind him once that it was time for you to head out. He paid you in full, a smile now firmly fixated in place on his face.

Cronus of course attempted to corner you as you were trying to leave, a little more reserved than usual, but still that shuckboy you had grown used to with that stupid sharky grin.

"You headin' out already, babe? We barely got a chance to talk." He reached out to grab your hand, but the binders prevented him from taking it and he pouted. "We should hang out."

"I really don't think that's a great idea...." You trailed off, "I have a lot I need to get done with my dissertation." (And tonight was datenight with Phil).

"But kitten, I have so much I wanna talk to you about considering we're moi- *friends* now." Cronus stuck out his bottom lip, fins drooping. "And you blowing me off like this, aka not the good, sexy, fun way, is really wrecking my, frankly, already delicate self esteem." He batted his eyes hopefully at you.

You couldn't help but roll your own. "Sounds like something you should talk to a therapist about because honestly you seem like you might need one, and guess what? I'm not a therapist. I'm a fucking grad-student in a shitty school's mycology department because it's all I can afford, and who can tell you whether fungus is edible or not, and is in no way shape or form qualified to discuss your obvious psychological issues. Goodnight, Cronus." You left him there with a flabbergasted look on his face, feeling more exasperated and guilty than smug.

The next afternoon while grocery shopping at the local market, you noticed something odd. A little, but quite peculiar thing. Usually people mostly ignored you, and while a majority of humans still did, you had gotten quite a few double takes and confused looks from the trolls you came across, and when you would look back at them they would immediately avert their eyes and walk away as quickly as possible (though one did stop to shamelessly look you up and down then wink which was moderately uncomfortable).

It was also definitely odd that the normally talkative troll that worked there was uncharacteristically quiet when you'd checked out and refused to make eye contact with you. You didn't really question it much, after all, you didn't know their life and you certainly weren't a particularly talkative or open person yourself, (and honestly, some days were just like that) but it was still *odd*.

You didn't take it personally, but the way they perked right up with the next customer made it hard not to. (Did you smell bad? You'd taken a shower this morning so you really hoped not....). But it was a small sample size nonetheless so you chalked it up to coincidence and you maybe smelling bad to trolls because you were pretty sure you didn't smell bad to humans.

You didn't have much time to contemplate it back at the lab, marking your experiment's growth and taking notes like the professional you were. You'd been measuring out some soil samples when you had met them; the new member of the department, ushered in by your department head and introduced simply as Bohemian Greeneye. A troll of tall stature (though judging from the Ampora's crispmass party they were probably average), they'd followed Dr. Harris with a lax smile on their face as they were given a short tour of the greenhouse.

And though you weren't one to judge someone for it (especially given your field...), you had to wonder if they were high. The greenhouse was nice, sure, but the place was a little... cluttered and something about their smile felt a bit spacey (though honestly it was probably the name Bohemian Greeneye, it just had that vibe).

It didn't take too long for your boss to go rushing off because it was about time for one of his classes to start, leaving you alone with your new partner. They mozied over to you, holding out a dark grey (much darker than either Eridan's or Cronus') hand.

"Nice to meet you, new partner." Their voice was a soothing tenor, easy.

"You too," You stood to shake their hand, and you met their eyes, and had to admit that they definitely deserved the name Greeneye because they were the without a doubt a brilliant shade of forest green. And though the smile on their face was lazy, there was a sharpness behind those eyes that was mildly unsettling.

You gave them a more in depth tour of the greenhouse and soon learned that they had steady hands and a thirst for knowledge like you wouldn't believe, but they were a private person and you weren't one to pry into their life just as they didn't attempt to pry into yours. And by the end of the day, you were pretty sure that you would be fast friends... or at least good coworkers.

You quickly found out that they were a vocal communist as well with a vendetta against both the power structures of Alternian society and "whatever the fuck is going on with you humans". You could appreciate that. You'd only ever heard about the hemospectrum from the Amporas, hearing about it from someone further down on the rung put a lot of their extravagance into context. Greeneye had a lot to say about highbloods in general, but managed to keep most of their conversation topics to mushrooms instead of "fish-fuckers" which you appreciated... (you still felt kind of weird about Cronus after the crispmas party if you were being fully honest).

"Do I have to be worried?" Phil asked after a while.

"Gotta give me a little context, babe. About the current state of the world? Global warming? The massive extinction event we're living through? Or about like normal everyday small scale stuff like leaving a carton of orange juice in the fridge without a cap because it rolled

under the stove?" You replied, sending him a meme in your chat about one of the games you played together before going back to writing your dissertation.

He just let out a frustrated sigh, "Here."

He dropped a link in the chat which you of course clicked on dutifully even though you were a busy person with things to do (that you really should be doing but hot damn couldn't a bitch catch a fucking break?).

Oh.

This was Cronus' soundcloud page.

"Why are you on Cronus' soundcloud?" You asked with a snort, looking at your mic even though you knew you weren't going to see Phil there.

"Sluts is a banger and you know it."

"Oh my god...."

"This ain't about me and my music tastes! Look at his most recent track." The line went silent after that.

You rolled your eyes but looked through the profile anyways, clicking on the one stamped as being posted yesterday (good fucking lord it was seven minutes long) labeled Quadrant Confusion, and braced for what would no doubt be a ridiculously raunchy song (probably the same one he'd sung to you at his party).

This... sounded different. It *felt* different. The melody started slowly, almost lilting in its ebb and flow. And then he began to sing.

And you froze.

It was genuinely beautiful, complex harmonies layered while staying true to his synth roots, and so far not overtly sexual, and this....

You swallowed.

.... This could be about *anyone*....

This didn't have to be about you.

This could be about anyone.

That... okay sure, a lot of the lyrics matched yourself, but that could be coincidence.

You clicked on the description, reading his word vomit about how he was proud of it, but that he was glad his friend wasn't really into his music because he wasn't quite ready to show them because they didn't feel the same about him yet.

He- he had plenty of friends that that description matched.

I ' d do anything to wake up in your arms one more time

Whisper pale as we pail limbs intertwined

You felt a chill run up your spine and you blinked. This wasn't you.

This wasn't about you. (That was a lie) (But if you repeated it to yourself enough it'd be true... right?)

And even though your cheeks heated up and your stomach felt like some rambunctious snakes had started a slither party up in there, you continued to listen, entranced; Ensnared like some bitch caught in the netting of a siren's song.

The spell broke as soon as soundcloud autoplayed the next song on his profile: Aquasex Renegade which was par the course for what you expected from Cronus. Raunchy lyrics that took themselves way too seriously, making it cringey rather than funny.

You took what felt like your first breath in seven minutes, closed out the window and brought back the file for your dissertation. After a few more minutes of silence, Phil finally spoke.

"Did you listen to it?"

"The most recent song Cronus released? Yes." You kept your voice level, starting the same sentence over and over again only to erase it.

"And?"

"It was very pretty."

"Babe, that asshole wrote a song about you and all you can say is it's pretty in the blandest tone ever?" There was an edge to his tone.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. He has plenty of friends, I'm sure it's about one of them." There were a lot of adult trolls at the party he referred to as friends so that probably counted, ergo it was not a lie. Checkmate.

Phil let out a frustrated sigh, "He literally describes you multiple times in the song and references the warmness of humans like fifty times. He calls you the sun, but smaller and more lovely."

"Phil, my dear, I think I know Cronus better than you do. That song is probably about someone else. There were a lot of people at that party."

"Stop lying to me!"

"There's nothing you need to worry about, Phil. I'm committed to you thick or thin, ups and downs." You replied adamantly.

"I'm not mad!" He insisted. "But he describes you down to the little details. There's no one else this could be about."

You chewed on your bottom lip and leaned back in your seat. "Okay, I'll give you the details part. There are some similarities... but Phil, please trust me when I say that Cronus is just a friend."

"Friend?! When did you become friends?" God you really didn't want to fight. You really didn't want to fight today.... "The last I heard you two were at each others throats all the time and that he was a massive jerk!"

"Well, we came to an understanding recently, and he's not all bad all the time. He's just bad and annoying *most* of the time." A month counted as recent, right? Probably.

"Babe... why did he sing about waking up in your arms?"

Ah.

That was....

Hmm... perhaps a miscalculation in not telling him.

"I fell accidentally fell asleep on his couch when I was drunk. Nothing happened, but we woke up next to each other *on the couch*. I promise you nothing happened. It wasn't a big deal." You replied gently.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to react like this. I didn't want to fight. Nothing happened, and I didn't think it was important enough to bring up." You felt guilty.

"How can I trust you when you go around keeping secrets?"

"They aren't secrets, Phil. I care about you too much to cheat, but I don't always think to tell you every detail that happens in my life. I haven't once lied to you." You took a deep breath to stabilize yourself because if you didn't you were pretty sure you would have a heart attack. "Ask me anything, I'm an open book."

"Did you have sex with him?"

"No."

Phil didn't sound particularly convinced, but he didn't press the issue, "Did you kiss him?"

You racked your brain, trying to remember all of the details from that night. "I was pretty drunk," You admitted, "But I think I remember kissing his hand under the mistletoe."

"No lips, no cheek?"

"No, but I wasn't aware kissing a friend on the cheek was off-limits." You frowned.

"Only for *him*." Phil acquiesced. "...Do you love him?"

"No." God this was tedious. "He is my friend, and I don't mind hanging around him sometimes, but no, I can definitively say, without a single doubt in my mind, that I do not love Cronus Ampora."

Phil let out a sigh that you hoped was of relief.

"Do you love me?" He asked.

You rested your face in your hands because this was too much. Everything was too much. You had a dissertation to write and papers to grade and samples to collect and a board to report to and a presentation that you had to get done by the end of the month and practice your speech with Greeneye so you two could get into the flow before the mycological conference and the lease for your apartment was going to be up soon and you heard the landlord was going to increase the price and- and your friend wrote a song about you and your boyfriend thought you had time to cheat and- "Phil.... please don't do this right now."

"So you don't feel any different towards me than you do for some-"

"Shut up!" You snapped. "Don't you dare put words in my mouth. I cherish you a great amount, and if you don't trust me enough to believe me then that's on you. I do not have the energy to coddle your paranoia right now. I have a *lot* on my plate."

Phil remained silent.

"Look, Phil, I care about you. A lot. Please just trust me. I'll tell you every little minute detail of my interactions with all of my friends if you want. In fact, yesterday I hung out with Greeneye in the lab well past our usual closing time. Our hands touched at one point while I was handing them a USB with what I have so far for our presentation that's due in a month so they could add onto it! *Gasp!*" You took a deep breath. "Sorry... that was petty. My research is just... very important to me. We made some pretty impressive breakthroughs and there's gonna be a lot of people at that conference and if we can secure more funding we can invest in more greenhouses to test different areas. I'm under a lot of stress right now... I don't want to fight."

It took a few moments for him to reply with a reluctant, "Okay. I understand you're under a lot of pressure.... I'll let it go for now. I love you."

"Thank you."
"I'll leave you to it. I think I hear my grandmother calling everyone for supper. She made chili and cornbread so I gotta go fast before my uncle eats it all. And if you could maybe... talk to Cronus about how you're already in a relationship I'd really appreciate it. Wish you were here; talk to you soon."

"Yeah.... Enjoy your dinner," You said as he hung up.

You went back to what was supposed to be the magnum opus of your academic achievements but couldn't help but just stare blankly at what you had written so far.

You don't know how long you sat there like that.

"Do you wanna hang out tonight?" Was the first question Cronus asked as soon as you crossed the threshold, his hands reaching out to clasp yours which you managed to dodge. He'd asked it at least twice (but usually more like three of four times) each time you went to Eridan's hive for your tutoring session. Always he would give you those sweet little puppy dogfish eyes (you knew he was just playing it up though) and when you inevitably turned him down would pout and mope, very obviously trying to guilt trip you.

"Cronus I have way too much to do tonight, I'm sorry."

"Oh," He stuck out his bottom lip (just as expected). "I just thought since we're moi- friends that we'd've hung out more, y'know? You always say you're too busy." He scuffed his feet against the floor.

You gave him a dry look and made a quick sweep in your peripheral view for Eridan and when you didn't see him, reached out and patted Cronus' cheek the way you knew he liked. "Hush."

His fins fluttered and he leaned into the touch but didn't stop pouting. "Kitten, please let's hang out tonight? It'll be so fun we can watch movies and cuddle and if that leads to," He winked and gave you his patented shuckboy smile, "Somethin' a little more *bow chika bo-"*

You were going to commit an act of violence. You hadn't heard that phrase in years and it evoked the primal need to smack him as hard as you could. "I *will* kill you if you *ever* say that to me again."

He just pouted more and you pushed past him to the dining room to set up and wait for Eridan to finally show up.

"But kitten, a man has *needs* ." He whined, moping along after you. " *I* have needs, you know. I promise it'll be amaz-"

He was needy little bitch alright.

"*Cronus*! Oh my cod go be a whiny little harlot somewhere else!" Eridan snapped with less vitriol than usual. He was wearing a lavender skirt with purple pinstripe leggings and his cape and somehow made it work.

Cronus just stuck out his tongue and made a rude gesture with his hands, but dragged his feet on over to the sofa where he flopped over the back and out of sight.

"Good afternoon, Eridan. I really like your outfit."

He positively beamed, but then settled into a prim smile and said, "I look resplendent I know, but thank you."

You settled in rather quickly, you really didn't have any time to waste. There was too much on your plate right now for you to go over on time like you sometimes did. You managed to corral Eridan to focus in for the most part. And by the end of the session you felt he was probably adequately prepared for his quiz tomorrow.

"Our play is opening in a few weeks and I would like for you to be in attendance." Eridan said after a few moments, catching you off guard.

Crap.

You already had so much to do....

"When is it?"

"Saturday after next." He examined one of his polished black nails as though he were trying to be aloof, but you could see the anxiousness in his eyes and *fuck...* you wanted to be there for him. Saturdays were usually your 'catch up on piled up lab work' days that also doubled as your sexy date night with Phil days because at least phone sex was *something*.

And that was just two weeks before the mycological convention.... You did your best to keep your cool, but you could feel the dread pooling in your gut because how could you tell him no? You *could* of course. It wasn't that you were incapable. It just... he seemed so eager and opening up to you you couldn't just tell him no. So you gave him a nod and said, "Absolutely," and swallowed down your panic about having to do even one more thing.

Eridan looked extraordinarily pleased and it did make it feel a little worth it because hot damn you were a lot fonder of that little piece of shit than you should have been given you knew he'd probably kill you in a heartbeat. But you liked to think he had changed so....

You bid him farewell, trying to figure out how you'd adjust your schedule to make sure everything squeezed in. If you moved your-

"Hey, kitten," You almost had a heart attack as Cronus practically materialized from nowhere. "So I was thinkin' and I know you said you're busy but maybe you should take a break and hang out tonight? We can watch movies and talk and cuddle and stuff. It'll be a lot of fun. Or maybe if you wanna play some game grubs we could do that too?"

"Cronus, I have way too much going on right now-"

"C'mon it's just one night, chief! It'll be fiiiine." He prodded.

"Cronus, I don't-"

"Kitten, it really feels like you're avoiding me. This is emotional neglect. I have needs, babe." He mustered his most serious pout, continuing on with some bullshit buzzword tirade but all you could hear in your head was Phil asking over and over and over and over if you'd spoken to Cronus about that stupid song yet and pushing and prodding and worrying why you kept pushing things off and dodging and your landlord telling you your rent was going up and it was still somehow the cheapest option available outside of moving back home and- "-

basically gaslighting me. I mean honestly you aint even given me your number yet or your chi-twitter or anything."

Something in you snapped. You broke out a customer service smile.

"You want my number, tiger?" You asked.

A massive grin broke out over his face. "Yes. Please. Also, really diggin' the tiger. You should keep calling me that."

You took out your pen and took his hand in yours, writing down the number you gave to spam websites on his palm. "There. Don't try it out yet, I don't have my phone on me."

He nodded enthusiastically.

It was petty... and a little mean, but you already knew he'd send you unsolicited dick pics. It wasn't even a matter of if, rather when. And when you could trust him enough to not to send unsolicited nudes (which all of them would be because you weren't about to ask him for them), you'd give him your real number.

Cronus was blushing so hard now he looked like a grape. A big 'ol sharky grape.

As you went to pull your hand away, he took it and pressed your knuckles to his lips in a chaste kiss. You could feel your face heat up and you jerked away.

"I should go." You gestured toward the door, making a beeline out of there.

"I'll talk to you later!" He called out after you, but you were almost back in your car, casting a quick wave over your shoulder before pulling out.

Was it kind of a dick move to give him a fake number? Yeah.

Did you feel bad about it as you got to the first turn? Yeah.

Did you, by the halfway point of your drive, consider turning around and apologizing? Also Yeah.

It wasn't that big of a deal. So what if you just pulled a classic douche scam. You would apologize to him next week.... Yeah. You just... needed a week to sort of... figure out your next move. You'd figure out how to make it up to him next week. Worst thing that'd happen is someone picking up and telling him he had the wrong number.

It wasn't a big deal.

Really.

You'd.... You could spend a few minutes with him next week and talk it over with him. It was fine.

And you should probably also talk to him about that song he'd made that was... maybe about you and you'd be able to clear everything up with him about it and you could tell Phil with a clear conscience that, yes, you did in fact talk to Cronus about it and no it was not about you.

That guilty feeling did *not* go away even after a few days. You had managed to carve out a chunk in your schedule to set time aside for Eridan's play, but you still felt bad about giving Cronus that spam number and no matter how hard you tried to focus on almost anything else, it continued to gnaw at the back of your mind.

It was stupid.... but it was a childish thing to do on your part. You should have just talked to him about it (not that he'd listen). Communication was important... taking time for your friends was important, and to be honest you were pretty sure you were his only friend even though there had been plenty of adults at the crispmas party that you were hard pressed to think as having been invited by Eridan.

And sure! Maybe it was Cronus' own damn fault for being such a piece of shit... but he wasn't all bad all the time. He was just....

You ran a hand through your hair.

He was just A Lot To Deal With.

"Hey," Greeneye interrupted your thoughts and you looked over at them, "You good?"

"Wh- yeah. I'm good, why?"

"You've just sort of been standing there staring into space for the last fifteen minutes. And that," They pointed to over the blank screen in front of you which had been playing clip of a seminar on biomass production from spent sulfite liquor by Filamentous Fungi a few minutes ago, "Finished about ten minutes ago."

"Ah, right. Thanks." You gave them a nervous smile and they just raised an eyebrow.

"Why don't you go ahead and press pause for a little while, it looks like you may not be in the right headspace for this right now."

"Maybe.... I mean there's still so much to do though. There are going to be so many people at that conference. I just want us to be prepared...." You swallowed and they leaned back in their chair.

"We will be, but I think you might be running on fumes right now. When was the last time you ate?"

You tried to think, but your mind was coming up blank. You didn't *feel* hungry, but you were pretty sure you hadn't had more than just a monster this morning. "Uhhh...."

"You wanna get some dinner and drinks? We can talk more about how we're gonna crush our competition." They grinned.

You really couldn't afford to eat out. Not with your rent going up... and on top of that you had already set up plans to meet Phil in april and you were trying to scrape up enough money to do that by then. "I um... can't really... uh... go out to eat."

"Oh, I don't really do restaurants. Too many people, y'know? I meant have dinner at my place, get some more done on our presentation, and have a cider or two." They stood up and made for the door, but paused to wait for you.

God that sounded nice. That sounded really nice... but you probably shouldn- "Yeah. That sounds good."

And it was a working dinner so you didn't have to feel bad about it. Which was always a positive.

"Great!"

It turned out they didn't live that far off of the college campus, maybe a few miles down a windy dirt road. The house was small, a little run-down but homey on the inside with shag carpeting in the living room. They'd told you to make yourself at home, so you of course just sort of sat awkwardly on their couch, reading some more on the different scientists and businessmen who were going to be at the conference while Greeneye made something that smelled a lot like curry.

They worked pretty quickly, chatting with you about your dissertation and how it was going. It was kind of relaxing despite the anxiety of being in an unfamiliar place. (Could you sprawl out? Could you lean back? They didn't tell you to take off your shoes but what if they had expected you to? Were they planning on hitting on you? You didn't know so you just sat there with your back rigid as a board.)

Greeneye brought out the food and a couple of bottles of cider. You thanked them, shoveling it down like a rabid beast finally realizing how hungry you were. It was delicious and flavorful but not at all spicy which was a little jarring for the overall flavor pallet. You ate in silence until they tapped a little bit on their bowl, looking an awful lot like they wanted to say something.

"So," Oh god they were going to hit on you too weren't they? Did you spray yourself in some sort of Troll-attracting fragrance? "Where do you want to start tonight?"

Oh thank god.

"I dunno, Greeneye. Maybe start working on our slide show?"

"Annuum." They gave you a lazy smile.

"What?"

They took a long draught of their cider. "My name. It's Annuum. Greeneye is just my title. Don't call me it in public, but in private you can call me Annuum."

"Okay cool. Got it, Annuum." You smiled back at them, taking a swig from your own bottle.

You worked some more for a while, and you had to admit that you felt a lot better with some food in you. You got your basic outline done and narrowed down a lot of what you wanted to show so that you weren't up there just reading from the twenty fucking page document you were writing like a loser. (You had grants to secure for goodness sake).

You finally saved it for the night, stopping for dessert (some sort of almond flavored cake) and another round of cider. They only ate about half of their slice before putting it down on the coffee table and leaning back in their chair. And in the silence you could feel the guilt bubbling up in your mind.

"What's up?" Annuum asked after a few seconds.

"I... may have done something really, really high school to one of my friends and gave him a fake number." You took a sip from your bottle. "And even though it was stupid and pretty harmless, I still feel like crap about it.... He just wanted to hang out."

"So why'd you do it?"

"I dunno...." You idly pushed the little chunk of cake left around your plate with your fork. "I just got so overwhelmed and I kind of snapped. I just don't have the time, y'know? He always wants to hang out, and I never can. I know he probably deserved it but...." You kind of slumped over a bit, staring despondently at the crumbs on your plate.

They sort of snickered, "You really don't have any time? You look miserable about it."

"I know, but there's just so much I have to do between working on my dissertation, finishing this presentation, work, everything else that I just...."

"Damn. That's some shit." They drank some more of their cider. "If you'd like, I can do some independent work on our presentation for a day. Could give you a little wiggle room."

"I couldn't do that to you," You replied quickly.

But they just shrugged, "It's not a big deal to relax for a little bit for a day. I can't do it frequently because there's only so much I can do on my own since we're both presenting, but if you need some time. I'm just throwing it out there."

You licked your lips. You could apologize with an actual gesture of good faith. Take a few hours to watch a crappy movie, unwind.... Maybe even actually talk to him about that song. The one that you definitely had only listened to once. (You'd tried to listen more but you always got so embarrassed that you couldn't get through the first minute or two before stopping and pacing around your apartment.)

"That... actually sounds amazing. Thank you, Annuum. Would this Thursday be okay?"

They nodded before returning to their cake, "Yeah just fine by me."

You continued to just sort of push yours around for a little while, acutely aware of the way they kept glancing at you so you finally shoved your last bite in your mouth self-consciously.

"I just have to ask, what's that whole deal?" They gestured with their bottle to your hoodie, the one Cronus had given you.

Oh.

"Not sure what you mean." You replied, mouth half full.

They just gave you a *look*.

"You realize that's the sign of the Orphaner, right?" You vaguely remembered Cronus saying something about someone by that title (Eridan worshiping him or something), and the vivid mental image of a scruffy DILF.

"It's just the same symbol that my friend has on all of his clothes." You weren't quite sure where they were going with this, but if it was common knowledge among trolls then the strange behavior you encountered while wearing it was starting to make sense.

Annuum seemed like they were trying to word something tactfully but also like the words tasted bitter in their mouth. "You know how humans pass things on to their offspring? Like names and legacies?"

You really didn't like where they were going with this.

"Yes I am aware of legacies and inheritance." They looked at you expectantly, and you shifted uncomfortably. The thought of the Amporas genetically or culturally (or both) related to the Orphaner was... less than pleasant. Sure, they were assholes, but they wouldn't- (Eridan would. Eridan would without any sort of hesitation. You could feel that in your bones and you hated it. And the thought of Cronus actually being a murderous bastard kind of sat in the pit of your stomach no matter how you tried to frame it as a cultural difference.)

But you could have sworn he'd said something about resenting the Orphaner. "I don't-"

"No highblood's hands are clean." The weight of their voice and the words they spoke settled on your shoulders like a mantle. "I'm not saying it's a bad thing to work for a seadweller, but I do need you to know that you're playing with very, *very* dangerous people." Their eyes softened (but you still felt a little sick, vividly recalling Eridan pulling a gun out on Cronus without a speck of hesitation). "I don't want to scare you, but I've come to think of you as a friend, and I want you to be safe. I'm not saying that you shouldn't wear it, because to be honest if I were in your position I probably would. I don't think anyone lower than indigo would turn down that opportunity. High risk, high reward. With something like that you'd really only have to be afraid of clowns or other chum buckets... or opportunists with a death wish but I think you'll be okay. Anyways, my point is that I want you to be safe."

"I appreciate that." You responded after a while... and you were. Appreciative that is. Because this was your lab partner and friend with a better understanding of the cultural significance of things. But you had to admit... you felt a lot more uncomfortable about everything. You knew

bonafide murderers. Probably killed people in cold blood murderers.... Even knowing that culturally it was accepted and expected, there was a part of you that kind of wanted to throw up.

But they'd changed. They'd changed.

The Mailman said so.

But what did The Mailman know anyways?

(They were god).

(No they weren't).

(But part of you was pretty sure they were).

You took a breath, giving Annuum a tight lipped smile.

You talked for a little while more, changing the subject back to fungus, helping you relax and digest both the food and the information they'd given you (that truthfully you'd always sort of known; the Amporas were a very dangerous lot to get entangled with).

And by the end of the evening you felt better knowing that you now had solidified your game plan for your presentation, you had cleared up a few hours to make up your... social fumble with Cronus, and also with the unequivocal information as to why trolls had been sort of avoiding you when you wore the hoodie he'd given you. Information was soothing.

When you arrived at the Ampora's that Thursday, you had brought your laptop so that you'd be able to choose from a specific list of movies you had curated for the occasion (completely platonic, non-magical, wholesome family movies like the Land Before Time).

But there was no answer when you knocked on the door. Which if you'd been knocking of the door of a normal person wouldn't have struck you as particularly odd. Most people didn't wait right at the door, their face pressed up against the glass like a kid waiting for their birthday guests to arrive. But given Cronus was very much not a normal person and did wait at the door for you with his face all smooshed up against the window, your curiosity had been piqued. You knocked again, starting to really feel the cold of the early February air, and when you were finally let it, it was by Eridan.

You didn't mind of course. Why would you?

This was a job.

Cronus had a life outside of you (maybe).

You tried to subtly look around to maybe catch a glimpse of his stupid fishy face, but it seemed he was not around.

You made some small talk with Eridan trying to decide if you should bother asking him where Cronus was. Because on one hand it wasn't your business... on the other you had gone and cleared a few hours for that stupid asshole. So, trying not to be too conspicuous, you casually said, "I think this is the longest I've gone without seeing Cronus, is he okay?" You joked.

Eridan gave you an offput look. "Cod I hope not."

It was wrong, but you couldn't stifle the little laugh at the back of your throat.

He picked at some fuzz on his scarf, a pleased little smile on his face, "I know I'm glubbin' hilarious, but in all seriousness I think he had to go somewhere today? I, personally, could not give a single ship less, but he's been leaving the house more frequently lately and I know it ain't for any sordid trysts. He ain't been gloatin' or anyfin." Eridan gave an over exaggerated grimace. "Glub knows I ain't interested in getting to know the intimate details of his day to day hedonistic lifestyle."

You nodded along, a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. And if you were being completely honest with yourself... you kind of wanted to cry; It was stupid, and childish, and you definitely weren't going to. *But y ou'd taken off to see him....*

You buried yourself in your work with Eridan, and when the session was over, you bid him a friendly farewell and went back to the lab and buried yourself in your research. Annuum didn't pose any questions, giving you time the next week to spend time with "your dumb little fish-stick" (their words, but honestly a very accurate descriptor).

The next week you knocked on the door to their hive, laptop weighing down your backpack as you waited once more to be let in. A familiar sinking feeling settled in the pit of your stomach. Not that you were owed anything... obviously his world couldn't just revolve around you. What a vain thought to have ever had. Just because he wrote a song about you didn't mean that he was....

Like you'd told Phil; it didn't mean anything.

And why would you even want it to? You hated the guy a few months ago. You still found him annoying now. So why were you.... Why did it even upset you that he wasn't waiting at the window like he always did?

It was because you had carved out time to spend with him.... That was definitely it.

Yes.

When you asked Eridan jokingly where the older Ampora was he sort of just shrugged.

"I try to tune him out when he talks but I think he mentioned something about seein' one. Maybe he even has, he's almost been more tolerable lately. He even gave me a well thought

out compliment and made me cluckbeast ova the other night without prompting.... Even if they did taste like the heel of a pissblo- *lowblood's* shoe."

Therapy. You blinked in surprise. That was good. No, that was great. Sure, maybe it sucked that you weren't getting to see him today, but at least he was doing better.

Something about the knowledge helped abate the unease, but part of you was still.... No. You were proud of him. You were happy for him and proud of him, and definitely weren't feeling sorry for yourself in the slightest or guilty about not being able to apologize. Maybe if you arrived just a few minutes earlier next week you'd be able to catch him....

But you weren't. He still wasn't there the following week even though you kept clearing your schedule for that stupid asshol- No. That stupid guy who was doing better who you barely liked anyway.

You couldn't help but feel like... maybe he was avoiding you though. Like you'd pushed just a little too far and now you didn't even have the chance to apologize unless you made some stupid grand gesture of clearing your schedule even more than you already had in order to seek him out. You didn't have enough time for that and you were pretty Phil kept pressuring you to do some sort of grand romantic gesture for your relationship to declare your love or something and you were just awful at picking up all of that and you still couldn't get your mouth to make the words right and you kind of wanted to cry because you really wanted to just turn your brain off for a few hours and watch silly wholesome movies.

At the end of the session, you wrote up a hasty note and asked Eridan to give it to Cronus and hoped that he actually would.

You really didn't expect him to (if anything you expected Eridan to read it the first chance he got so you kept it short and sweet).

You couldn't take off the next week. That weekend was the mycological conference and you ate, slept, and breathed fungus. Your dissertation was airtight. You and Annuum had a jazzy smooth flow (god you hated that those words actually passed through your head). You could do this....

Eridan even wished you good luck.

You didn't bother asking him if he'd given Cronus the note.

You didn't bother asking him where he was.

A Conversation with the Prodigal Son

Chapter Summary

A chance encounter after the mycological convention

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long, I got a new job and it's just been hectic trying to find time to work and write and just... try to get everything done. I really appreciate all of the kind words and words of encouragement that everyone gave me that really kept me plodding along with this.

Eridan's play had been lovely.... or well... you figured it had been good. In truth you'e spent most of it engrossed in your notes and your own thoughts, and you hadn't really been paying close attention to the actual performance. You would have loved to, really you would, but the conference had been only a few days away so there was only so much of yourself you could give. But you had taken a few moments to look for a familiar set of lightning horns and slicked back hair in the crowd.

You hadn't been able to find him.

Cronus hadn't been there.

Or at least you hadn't been able to find him. (Admittedly you hadn't tried super hard because you still had so much to do... but you were pretty sure you'd have noticed his look in the audience.

You weren't massively worried. You didn't have the emotional energy to be. But you couldn't deny that you kind of missed that provocative dumbass. Would you admit it if someone were to ask? No. Absofuckinglutely not.....

... But in that small space in your mind where it was quiet and you were alone... you couldn't help but feel a twinge of loneliness without him.... Which was silly because you weren't lonely. You had your friends and Phil and... just way too much going on to have time to feel lonely. (Didn't stop you from-)

Yeah, you didn't have time to feel lonely.

But on the long car drive home from the city while you were left to stew in your own thoughts....

But the conference... you'd thought it had gone well. You thought you'd swayed some potential investors in your favor... but now you weren't so sure. There had been a lot of competition and only so much funding to go around.....

And maybe.....

Maybe you just weren't cut out for this.

You weren't going to cry. You were above that.

Your grip on the steering wheel tightened. You loved your field... but this... this was just....

Ahead your headlights illuminated a figure standing on the side of the road; Candy corn horns- unmistakably a troll. A Big one.

You slowed down, doing a doubletake as you began to recognize their shape: two proud lightning bolts.

But it couldn't be.

No.

What were the fucking odds... this was the middle of nowhere. Well... not really. It was only a few miles out of town. But still, fancy pants rich boy Cronus wouldn't be out here alone at night... sitting on the guardrail like some sort of unkempt vagrant.

But by god did it look like him. Eerily like him.

And you hated that you were doing this, but you stopped, rolled down your window like it was the beginning of a fucking slasher movie, and called out, "Cronus?"

It was the dumbest move you'd probably ever pulled in your life, but when he looked up at you, those gold and violet eyes regarding you with a mixture of recognition and an emotion you couldn't quite place, you knew without a doubt who it was.

He called out your name, squinting into the car, voice hoarse. "'S it really you? I ain't hallucinating or anything am I?" His words were slurred....

He was sloshed. Drunk. Inebriated to the highest of heavens.

Some part of you had always sort of suspected he was an alcoholic (how could you not with that liquor cabinet the size of a large fridge... and a wine cellar with only a few bottles....), but seeing him here, now, absolutely plastered at 9:30PM on the side of the road in the middle of the woods... it did something to you.

Made something in your gut writhe and sink, heavy as lead.

"Yeah, it's me alright. What are you doing out here?"

He ran a hand through his unusually messy hair, mumbling something about human driving machines and not working and poorly made two-wheel devices.

You swallowed, your heart swelling with a previously unimaginable pity as you looked at that pathetic shuckboy (*your* pathet-).

"Do you need a ride?"You asked.

He stared down at his feet, kicking at some debris and shrugging his shoulders, mumbling something completely unintelligible.

It wasn't a yes.

You leaned over and opened the passenger side door anyway. "Get in."

It took a few moments of him waffling around before he muttered "Whatever" and got in.

He smelled overwhelmingly of alcohol and something sweet you couldn't quite place and of course the body spray he continued to wear even though you had some vague memories about telling him it smelled awful. (You were pretty sure you smelled weed too but it was sort of hard to make out with all of the other scents assaulting your nose).

You looked him over in the dark once, but it was hard to make out anything in the dim light of the dashboard and his own bioluminescence.

"Let's get you back home." You gave him a sympathetic smile before turning back onto the road, but he just rested his head on the window, horns clinking against the frame.

Cronus was silent for a while.

And you hated to admit that that worried you, but you didn't prod him further.

Finally he mumbled out a very small, very tired. "I don't want my lusus to see me like this."

You would have missed it if you hadn't been listening for it.... And you felt an uncomfortable pang in your chest.

"Okay."

You weren't quite sure where to go from there though. You could take him back to your apartment or back to your office, but something about either of those options didn't feel quite right. It was too enclosed... too intimate.

Without thinking you turned onto one of the back roads.

"I thought you were doing better." You said after a while, trying to be as gentle as possible.

"I was. I- I *am,"* His voice cracked. You placed a tentative hand on this shoulder. "I just...."

Cronus went silent after that, and you were pretty sure if you could see in the dark that his eyes would be wet.

"Why do you even care? It's not like you wanna be around me. Nobody does." He hissed finally.

You winced.

"That's not entirely accurate...."

He let out a derisive snort but didn't expand on it.

It took about ten minutes for you to finally turn around a bend and park. Your mushrooming spot... well one of them at least. It was a lovely spot to hike, and there were no houses around for a long while. The little hill looked out over a pond, trees lining every part of it.

"Are you okay?"

"Just peachy." He rasped, finally looking at you again.

You reached out and took hold of his hand. It was cold and clammy and you weren't quite sure but you could have sworn it felt bigger than it had been the last time you'd held it. In fact, everything about him seemed... bigger. His horns, his shoulders, his hands....

"You take me out here to cull me?" He asked after a while with a dry laugh. "It's about time."

"Oh hush." You said softly, petting his mussed hair. "The fresh air will do you some good."

You let go of his hand and left the car, circling around to open your trunk and pull out the old heavy blanket you kept in there for emergencies. You laid it out in front of your car and then knocked on his window, gesturing for him to come out. Cronus just gave you a grumpy look and you opened the door yourself.

"C'mon." You held your hand out for him. He took it after a few moments and stumbled after you to the blanket where you helped him flop onto it. You sat with him, threading your fingers together and he leaned heavily against you, his chin on your shoulder as he stared intently at you.

"Did ya get me a present?" He slurred.

You just gave him a confused look.

Cronus deflated a little more. "No one else did either." But then he giggled, biting his lip and smiling, "I know what I want though, and you ain't even gotta go buy it. 'S more of an action we do together."

He waggled his eyebrows suggestively and shimmied his hips.

You rolled your eyes, shrugging him off. "Is it some troll holiday?"

The smile fell from his face, uncharacteristically serious.

"No one remembered."

"Remembered what?"

But he continued on like he hadn't heard you, lost in his own thoughts. "I thought at least Danny or Meenah would remember to make fun of me a little.... This 's the most important one."

His hand tightened around yours as he buried his face into his sleeve and let out a throaty sob. You sidled closer to him, patting his shoulder awkwardly. "Is everything okay?"

"*No!* " He choked out between hiccups. " *It isn't."*

You didn't know how to respond other than rubbing soothing circles on the back of his hand with your thumb. He sobbed for a while, but you were there with him and that had to count for something. Slowly it petered off into sniffles and he looked up at the full moon, blinked a few times then back at you, breath slowing.

"Today is my wriggling day." Cronus gave you a sad smile.

For a second you were confused as you pieced together everything he'd said.

His birthday.

It was his (alien) birthday.

"Congratulations!" You patted his shoulder.

"*No!* You don't get it. Today is my wriggling day. I'm thirteen sweeps old today." His eyes were imploring, but you were incredibly lost (were birthdays a bad thing on Alternia?). He just shook his head with a sigh and leaned back, his horns clinking against the grill of your car. "Do you know what it's like to be so universally unimportant to people that they don't care if you were culled right here, right now?"

"I'm not sure I'm following.... Sorry."

"If the empire wasn't in such a disarray right now, today is the day the drones'd cull me. Well... technically at sun up so I'd still have a couple of hours at least to save my ass."

Your eyes went wide.

"And it shouldn't be this hard, y'know?" His voice had a twinge of panic to it. "It ain't even gotta be a permanent thing. It's not like they can actually measure how flushed or pitch you are with someone, you just gotta fill a fuckin pail."

"And I'm supposed to feel *lucky* because two wipes before my ordeals the Condesce and Gl'bgolyb just up and vanished so I did*n't* even have to go *throug*h those. And I'm still *lucky* because at least I'm a highblood so I didn't automatically get culled at eleven. But even with

two extra sweeps I still couldn't even fill those quads *once*. I didn't even get approached on my eleventh sweep, and I ain't gonna be approached now or maybe even ever. But it doesn't change the fact that *I* know that nobody cared enough to at least fake it for a night. Not even my own friends...."

Cronus looked at you again. "But the doc told me you care about me." He licked his lips. "He said you probably just don't know how to show it." His eyes slid up and down your form. "I know how you can show it."

"I do care about you, Cronus." You replied gently, "But if you're asking me what I think you're asking me, then you should already know the answer."

"But-"

"Cronus, I really care about you. You are my friend which is why even though it's dark and we're way outside the town limits I stopped on the side of the road and picked you up when you could have just as easily been someone else like a murderer or a serial killer or some sort of human-eating monster." You pet his face and he nuzzled into your palm, snickering. "But you know that I am happily committed to my current romantic partner. You aren't a failure, and you have a chance to explore who you are and what you want. That's a good thing."

He looked like he was about to cry again and you took his hand in both of yours. He pulled away. "No! You don't *get* it!" He stood up, pacing around, movements agitated. "*Nobody* gets *it!* This isn't just some- I'm-"

"I thought after the crispmas party were were gonna be together, but we're *not*!" Cronus' voice cracked. "It barely even feels like we're friends! We don't hang out, we don't talk, we don't *do* anything together, *you even gave me a fake fuckin number*. It's like you don't want anything to do with me, but you keep saying you care, and- *and like an idiot I keep believing you."*

That hit you like a knife in the gut. Like those three sided blades outlawed by the Geneva Convention for being awful and inhumane, twisting.

"Cronus...."

"I'm so fucking *angry*! All the glubdamn time! I just want to scream and rip something apart! And no matter what I do, I can't escape it! Nothing helps! I thought that stupid doctor was supposed to fix me but I-" He let out a little hiccup-y sob before blinking a few times, affixing a very unconvincing smile on his lips. "Shit.... That's... I'm not.... I ain't fuckin' broke though...." He looked away, leaning against the side of your car in a slouch. "....People actually *like* broke fucks."

You weren't quite sure how to respond. What were you supposed to say...?

"Don't fuckin' look at me like that... I ain't your fucking charity case." A bitter laugh escaped his lips. "That's what this is, ain't it? *Your good fuckin' deed o' the week?*"

"That's no-"

"*Why the fuck else would you be here? No one wants to be here!*"

You didn't feel that way....

"No one wants to be near me!"

No... you did you just....

"Just fucking admit it already!" He took a deep, shaky breath. " *...You can stop pretending...."*

The highblood slid down until he was seated next to you again, slumped, defeated.

There was an uncomfortable lump in your throat, and you didn't trust yourself to speak. "I don't..." (You didn't what?) "Don't... I don't feel that...."

You reached out to touch his shoulder, anything, if you could just-

He shrugged you off.

Cronus pulled out a pack of cigarettes after a while and put one in his mouth before stuffing it back into his pocket. You expected him to just chew on it like he normally did, but he pulled out a lighter instead and lit it.

You had no idea what came over you as you snatched it from his lips as he attempted to take a drag.

"The fuck you think you're doin', kitten?" He hissed, face twisted into a sneer.

"It hurts your gills, and it's bad for you." You stared into his eyes as best as you could in the dark, dodging his hand as he clumsily reached for the cigarette when you tried to snuff it out on the ground.

"So? Ain't like nobody ever cared 'fore." Cronus made a grab for your hand but you successfully managed to stymie his attempt at getting back his stupid cigarette. However, his fingers wrapped tightly around your wrist. "Just give me back my damn cig."

"No! It smells bad and you said it hurts your gills." You tried to pull away, but his grip was like a steel trap.

"So what?!" He snarled. "*Stop acting like you care!*"

You attempted to break out of his grip again, throwing more of your weight into it. You struggled against him as he tried to get it back, squirming and wrestling. You put up a valiant fight, but he had a lot of advantages in the height and strength departments and after a while he finally managed to pin you down; hands anchoring your wrists to the earth, knees straddling yours, a scowl on his face.

"Now give it back!"

"No!" You shot back with just as much vitriol, crushing the cigarette in your hand (fortunately it had mostly been extinguished already so it didn't hurt too much).

For a second you almost wondered if someone had snuck in and turned your car's engine on, but it didn't sound quite like that. That deep, rumbling almost growl-

Oh fuck.

That was Cronus.

You probably should have been scared.

Those serrated teeth catching the dim light of his bioluminescence as it flashed brilliantly (beautifully) for a moment were definitely menacing (a lot more than you'd ever care to admit).

"I'm not going to back down on this so you can stop these stupid intimidation tactics."

"Why? Why the fuck do you keep pretending to care? What the hell is in it for you?" He ground out, "Do you get some sort of sick satisfaction from watching me do this?"

"Maybe it's not my place, but I'm not going to let you just hurt yourself," You whispered back. "Because I *do* care about you. I'm sorry that I'm pretty horrible at showing that.... And it was wrong of me to give you that fake number when I should have just taken the time to explain to you why I wasn't comfortable giving it to you yet."

The growling petered off, but he didn't release you. "I used to hate you." Cronus murmured. "But you make that really hard when you start talkin'."

He went silent for a while, the silence heavy all around you.... You wanted to say something to break it, but you weren't quite sure what. Cronus used to be so easy to hate, some one-dimensional douchebag shuckboy, and you kind of hated that he was becoming more and more of a person in your mind.... But you certainly didn't hate him anymore... and you really wished you were somehow able to articulate it with any success.

"I used to think about this a lot." He let out a little laugh as he spoke. "Us in this position... me pinning you down just like this." He swallowed. "Fucking you so silly that your voice'd go hoarse from screaming out my name over 'n over."

Cronus leaned in a bit, letting go of your wrists to prop himself up on his elbow instead, his other hand stoking down your arm to twine his fingers with yours. "'N I'd make you feel real good." His words were slurred, and he still reaked of alcohol.

This was wrong.

Your mouth went dry, thoughts racing. When you finally got your voice to work (despite the uncomfortable heat pooling in your gut), you stated simply. "Cronus," (You tried your best to ignore the way he stilled when you said his name), "... Friends don't tell friends about their masturbatory fantasies about them."

He didn't move, and you wished you could bring yourself to care more, but the way your breath caught in your throat was less than strictly decent and you hated yourself for it. Because you *didn't* want this (you had Phil.... you were *happy* with Phil... even if you were kind of mad at him).

Finally, after what felt like forever, he let you go, sitting up a bit.

You were both silent for a long while, and you self consciously licked your lips before clearing your throat.

"I'm sorry." You started. "...For giving you that fake number. That was wrong of me and a really crappy move to pull especially because I do consider you a friend."

"Yeah it was." He replied.

"I was just afraid you'd send me nudes or something." You admitted. "And I really didn't want to deal with that."

He didn't answer that.

"You can't tell me you weren't going to send me nudes ever."

"Well I mean... mishaps happen sometimes.... What if my finger slipped in the middle of the night or something?" Cronus mumbled sheepishly.

"And *that's* why I didn't give you my number ... and I should have explained that instead of giving you a fake one. Just because I was under a lot of stress from my job... and life," (~~And Phil~~), "It didn't make it right or okay. I'm sorry." You took his hand and he squeezed yours in turn. "I wanted to apologize to you sooner, but you weren't around. I even gave a note to Eridan to give to you... I guess you didn't get it though." He shook his head. "I'd cleared out my schedule a couple of times so that we could hang out and I could make it up to you... and explain."

He let out a huff. "Now you're just making things up."

"No, it's true. You could even ask Greeneye. I had to coordinate with them to get the time to." You really hoped he believed you. You knew Greeneye hated highbloods with a passion and probably would hate to meet him, and you really would prefer not to involve them.

He was silent....

"... I missed you." You admitted after a long, painfully awkward while.

A sound like a fishing rod being cast (it was the only analogy you could think of) left Cronus' throat and he turned to look at you, an odd expression on his face in the dim light. Letting go of your hand, he raised his own to stroke your cheeks with both of his. They were slightly tacky and you really hoped they were at least relatively clean, but you didn't stop him. He inched his face closer to yours and you were concerned for a moment that he was about to try to kiss you, but his nose just bumped your own as he pressed his forehead to yours.

"I missed you too." He breathed out.

And you felt something inside of you crumble... and just like that you were a poached egg again, his claws dangerously pricking the egg white threatening that gooey yolk. It was too much.

Everything was too much.

You weren't-

"'m sorry for ruining your night...." He murmured with a surprising amount of clarity, and you weren't sure if you wanted to laugh or cry.

"You didn't ruin it."

He didn't seem convinced.

"It already kind of sucked..." You admitted after a moment. "I really don't know if we managed to secure any grants at the conference, and we probably won't know for a while.... And uh..." You let out a shaky breath, "Some stupid Pennsylvanian mushroom ag tycoon heir told me to quit because someone '*like me'* wasn't cut out for the mushroom business. And I *know* that he's just some shit-head trust fund baby but it was like he was voicing everything I've ever fel-"

"Do you want me to kill him?" Cronus asked... and you knew he was dead serious. There wasn't even a hint of humor in his voice. "Say the word and I'll do it."

Cronus' eyes met your own, level, intensely violet from his own bioluminesense, "Your enemies are my enemies."

You swallowed, laughing nervously. You'd never had anyone offer to kill someone for you. Jokingly said it to comfort? Sure. Seriously said they'd kick someone's ass? Sure. Seriously offer to kill someone for you? No. Well... technically yes now.

"No I um... I don't think that's really necessary. He was a dickhead but I don't know if he should like... die. Besides," You whispered, voice cracking a bit in a way that you hated, "You'd get in serious trouble and I really can't ask you to murder someone for me."

"It's not murder if they deserve it. I'm a seadweller." He replied simply. "I won't get in trouble... but uh. Shit..." He scratched the back of his neck sheepishly. "Humans don't really do that, do they...?"

"Not really. Is that um... *common practice* on Alternia?"

"Well... yeah." He mumbled. "You're supposed to cull anyone who messes with you or your qua- friends. Your friends. You gotta look out for the people you care about."

Your heart fluttered in your chest in a way that gave you indigestion.

"Yeah, we uh... we don't do that here. Or at least it's considered a criminal offense that lands you in jail so...." And not for the first time you wondered if he'd ever killed anyone. You knew for a fact Eridan had... and you knew for a fact that that kid had accomplices. Violence was encouraged on Alternia... but the idea of Cronus actually going through with it....

You weren't sure how you felt about it.

He picked at his jeans. "Yeah... well you're being ethnocentric right now so.... Fuck. Forget I said anything." The troll drifted off into an awkward silence.

You didn't know how to respond.

You loosened your tie, a weight in your gut shifting. "... Phil said my outfit looked silly and stuffy like an old librarian or a nerdy middle school science teacher who's trying too hard...." You admitted after a while (He'd said it looked like something Ross from Friends would wear too but you knew the reference would go over Cronus' head). "And I know he didn't mean anything by it, but that kind of hurt too." *You were being sensitive again (why did he get to be sensitive though ?).*

You'd thought you looked good in your mushroom tie... professional but a little whimsical too. You didn't listen to him of course, you wore it and rocked it, but-

"What" Cronus looked at you, a completely flummoxed expression on his face. "Is he re- uh..." (You appreciated that despite his inebriation he'd caught himself.) "Is he fuckin' dumb 'r somethin'?"

You snorted.

"No, I'm fuckin' serious. Is he like... brain dead or somefin'?" He took a second to take you in. "Dude obviously has shit taste..." He bit his lip, reaching out a hand to take your tie between his fingers and get a better look.

You felt your breath hitch, heart tapping out a samba in your chest. It was as though you were being set on fire slowly, electricity burning through your body.

It was too much.

Cronus' eyes locked with yours, "Missing out on the best part."As he spoke he tugged you gently forward by the tie. (Why weren't you resisting?) "You can do so much with ties...."

It was all too much.

You pulled back, energy practically sizzling in your veins, up and down your spine, constricting around your throat, choking you.

"*It's too much,* " You words sounded so foreign, slow, distorted like it was travelling through water. " *You're asking too much.*"

Everything was just too-

That stupid gooey yolk flowing over, making a mess. (*You were a mess*).

And something about the way he looked at you made you sick to your stomach, churning, waiting at the back of your esophagus for a trigger to let go.

"I'm sorry." The seriousness in his tone... something in you snapped.

"*It's not just you.*" Your voice cracked, pinpricks starting to well up in the worner of your eyes. "*Everyone wants too much.... I'm only one person."*

He looked lost for a moment, like he wasn't quite sure what to do and you for the most part tried your best to collect yourself like a frantic worker trying to patch up holes in a dam as they kept springing up despite being frozen in place. "*I'm just one person....*"

Tentatively he wrapped his arms around you, pulling you in for a hug. It was awkward and light like he wasn't quite sure how much pressure to exert. But as he tucked your head under his chin, whatever last, frayed strand of composure holding everything together snapped and you let out a soft, hiccupy sob.

You hugged him back, clinging to him like some feral spider monkey baby reuniting with its mother, fingers digging into the leather of his jacket, squeezing him hard enough that had he been human you probably would have felt bad.

Not that you had much capacity to care about that. But you did...

God... falling apart in front of a depressed alcoholic on his birthday. Making him comfort you... *you really were pathetic weren't you*.

Couldn't keep it in for even an hour longer.

He'd hate you after this.

For ruining his even sucky birthday even more.

But he didn't move to push you away, and you let out a very wet sob, burying your face in his clavicle. *You were ruining his shirt now. Absolutely pitiful.*

You ruined everything you came into contact with.

Just like a slime mold, decay in extant form, breaking down and destroying everything you touched.

(But slime molds were an important part of an ecosystem. You were-)

Fusarium oxysporum then... the disease threatening banana extinction. Something to be despised. Ruining joy. Ruining the delicious bananas of life.

What kind of person couldn't tell their significant other they loved them?

What kind of person gave their friend a fake number because they didn't want to take the time to explain why-

What kind of person -

Cronus shifted, pulling you closer, breathing deep, a low, slow click coming from somewhere in his chest. And then he began to hum, snapping you out of your current train of thought.... A tune that was far too sweet and far more familiar than it should have been.

A tune you really needed to talk to him about... which just elicited another round of sobs because you really should have confronted him about it because you'd wanted him to be real, but not that real, and it really was so lovely compared to the contrived shit he usually put out so how could you crush his dreams like that. But Phil was right because he'd still very clearly overstepped.

You sobbed even harder.

God you were such a fuckup.

Crying in front of Cronus *of all people.* (He'd cried in front of you before).

But that was different.

You were supposed to be stronger than this. More composed than this.

You were supposed to be in control of yourself. Not be some weepy mess.

He switched tunes, making a soft, comforting, shooshing sound instead, patting your back.

You sniffled a little, taking in a deep breath (you definitely caught a whiff of weed on him) and holding it in.

You'd fucked up enough tonight.

Not that holding your breath like an irate toddler really helped.

But as you exhaled, controlling your breathing, the tears just would not stop. But Cronus kept patting your back, making that shooshing noise.

After a long while, the hiccups began to subside, your breathing leveled, and your crying slowed.... You still didn't let go though.

You weren't quite sure how long you clung to him (long enough that the wetness on his shirt had started to get frigid)... but you could feel him shivering. He was absolutely freezing to the touch. Crap.... This guy was used to eighty degree weather all year round. He may not even be fully warm-blooded. What had you been thinking bringing him out here like that.

"You're cold." You mumbled into his chest and he let out a weak chuckle.

"I'm okay."

"Let's get you somewhere warmer...."

"'m warm enough with you."

"Cute." You pulled away, giving a shaky laugh. Your eyes adjusted to the light, breath catching in your throat as you met his gaze. His freckles glowed faint violet in the pale moonlight, irises illuminated by that same dim light as he regarded you with an uncomfortably, intimately tender and serious expression.

There was something in the air... magnetic... electric. Heavy.

And in that tear soaked, runny nosed moment you wanted to give him everything he wanted.

And in that moment, you knew you couldn't.

You shouldn't.

You swallowed.

"C'mon, let's find somewhere warmer." Your own voice sounded so alien to you.

He patted your cheek, frigid hand uncomfortable against your tacky skin.

"Yeah, okay...." Cronus replied. You took his hands and helped him up.

You half dragged him back to your car, turning up the heat as high as it would go (which admittedly was not high given the fact that your car was kind of a massive piece of crap), so you weighed your options.

Taking him back to his place right now was probably still a no-go and you had to admit you would have felt weird even asking him about it since your breakdown in front of him. You couldn't take him back to your place either though.... Not that you didn't trust him or anything.... It- it wasn't that.

And you certainly trusted yourself (didn't you?)

But you had to admit the thought of him being in your cramped little studio apartment when you knew the sort of home he lived in was kind of... daunting. And you hadn't cleaned. And...

It really wasn't that much warmer than here.

So you opted to take him to the next best place.

The drive was shorter to get there anyways. You could feel him staring intently at you as you drove, but you tried to ignore the awkwardness of it. Occasionally he'd reach out and pat-stroke your arm and you'd mumble out, "I'm driving and I don't want to crash so please keep your hands to yourself."

And he'd reply with, "Sorry, you just looked so tense."

You'd figured on the parking lot being empty on account of it being a Sunday night, but it always struck you odd just how few cars there were. You got to park as close to the building as you wanted.

"C'mon." You hopped out, waiting for him and taking his hand as you guided him inside to the dining hall... But it was closed. Of *course* it was. You sighed, acutely aware of Cronus pressing close to you.

You dragged him down the hall to the large building across the way and down a flight of stairs, down a few more halls to your tiny little office that you shared with the other grad students in your program.

Your companion looked around blearily, "The fuck is this shithole?"

You smacked that ungrateful asshole's arm. "This is my office, jackass."

"Oh shit! Uh..." He blanched, "I mean it... 's okay? Maybe even great? Yeah it's a great office."

You rolled your eyes, gesturing to the old, moth eaten love seat that had been there longer than you'd probably even been alive. "Make yourself at home."

He flopped down, the cushions under him letting out an indignant puff under his weight. Now that he was in the light, you were positive he looked different, but you couldn't quite place what was off.

Probably a trick of the lighting in there and his unkempt appearance.

You got set to work making coffee in the old machine that had been there since long before you had even joined the grad program. It always sucked, but it usually did the trick to keep you up when you couldn't afford the time to go to the dining hall.

You scoured the room for mugs, eventually finding a couple that were mostly clean and washing them out in the bathroom sink next door. Cronus just looked up at you from his spot on the old loveseat, eyes half-lidded, with a goofy, blissed grin on his face.

It was... cute. *He* was cute.

And there was nothing wrong with admitting that to yourself. It wasn't like it was going to go anywhere or anything. And just because you thought that in this moment he was being cute didn't mean that you wanted to fuck him. Or that you wondered just how sharp his teeth were.... Or what it would feel like if he nipped your ski-

You turned your head back to the coffee maker, staring at it intently.

Nope. Nope. Nope. You absolutely did not think about that at all.

He was your *friend*. Good friendly friend. Who was your friend.

You were friends.

Yes.

Finally after what felt like forever, the ancient coffee machine finished up the pot, and you gave it a few more seconds to make sure that your blush had subsided before you poured it out into the mugs. "I'd ask if you take it with cream and sugar but I think the only creamer in here is An- Greeneye's and I don't think they'd really be happy about us using it all up...."

You handed him his mug, and he shrugged. "You just like giving me trash for gifts don't ya."

He flashed his teeth good naturedly, holding the mug close to his chest in both hands.

You tried to give him a dry look, but with the corners of your lip tugging upwards against your will, it was hard to make the expression you wanted. "Well, I figured I had to ruin your night somehow since it looks like the crying didn't do the trick."

He just smiled softly at you, reaching out to stroke-pat (you were pretty sure he called it papping) your cheek. "I liked it when you cried. Got to be a good moirail for you."

You weren't sure how to respond so you just tapped the edge of your mug against his. "To us, and to friendship." You gave him a half smile. "Happy wiggly day."

He made a choking sound, and when you looked at him, a disheveled mess in the light, he was blushing furiously. "I didn't- I fuckin s-swear I- shit I never even...." He took a second, licked his lips, then smoothed down his hair, "I mean... It's uh... haha It.... It's- I think you mean *wriggling* day."

Oh... that must have had very different connotations....

"Happy wriggling day!" You amended, flushing uncomfortably.

You couldn't meet his eyes after that, and drank your disgusting, sludgey coffee in silence.

You could hear loud music coming from the frat house next door and you wondered how many of your students were there and who wouldn't show up tomorrow... and if any of them were going to try to raid your greenhouse which you hoped beyond hope they would not.

You studied Cronus out of the corner of your eye... No. There was definitely something different about him.

He looked.... Bigger.

Bigger and... older maybe?

His horns definitely seemed longer than you'd remembered them... and you could swear his skin had been more of a slate grey than a charcoall grey.

You must have been staring because he fidgeted, a strained expression on his features. "Do I got something on my face?"

"Sorry... you just look different from the last time I saw you." You replied.

He looked away, silent for a while, fingers tapping out an erratic pattern on his cup. "Good different... or bad different? Y' can be honest." His voice was quiet, words tentative and resigned.

"Cronus..." You set your mug down on the floor and leaned over to ruffle his thick hair. "Different doesn't always have to be good or bad.... But the only times you've ever come close to looking bad is when you're saying nasty, awful shit."

He flushed, the thin membranes of his fins going a vivid violet. "That was before my molt...."

You combed your fingers through his hair, smoothing it back and he leaned into your touch, another clicking sound coming from his throat. "You look perfectly fine."

"Is it stupid that I was kind of hoping to come out looking like a human 'r somethin'?" He closed his eyes. "I wonder about that a lot.... What life woulda been like if I'd hatched as a human? With a real human family and human friends. Going to school and college and having crazy adventures and parties with a ragtag, loyal group of friends who took me seriously and cared about me.... Having a human lover who stood by me even when things got bad...." His voice wavered. "It sucks being a troll. I suck at being a troll...."

"Cronus," He shivered when you said his name. "I think... you have the wrong idea of what being a human is like... because for most of us that's not the case. A lot of the time...." Fuck, you were really admitting this weren't you, "It's kind of lonely. And a lot of us never really had a group of friends to go on wacky adventures because that mostly just happens in movies and shows and books... not real life." You softly raked your nails along the back of his head and he melted. "And if it makes you feel any better... I kind of suck at being a person too. Human or troll, you're a person and... I don't think that we're all that different. Maybe culturally, maybe physically too, but I think that cerebrally we're all... we all have similar needs and wants."

You made the mistake of meeting his eyes, and something constricted around your heart because fuck....

There was such an overwhelming, imploring loneliness.... The sort that gnawed away and ate at you until.... Fuck.

The kind of loneliness you always sort of knew was there.

You swallowed, "And sometimes... troll or human we just don't fit in... and it can really fucking suck because I don't think.... No. I know that none of us are meant to face life alone." You ducked your head a little, "I'm not really sure where I'm going with this, but I guess I just.... Being alone can fuck with you. Convince you of things that you might not necessarily believe otherwise. And I think that maybe it's kind of the same no matter what species you are."

He'd been alone for a long time, hadn't he.

"Does it ever stop hurting?" His voice was hoarse.

You wished you had an answer for him.

His eyes met yours and you felt your heart skip a beat.

You weren't quite sure what possessed you, but before you realized it, you leaned in, nose bumping against his. You could hear his breath hitch. And you pressed your forehead to his, staring him straight in those vivid violet eyes of his.

"You don't have to be alone."

And it was selfish, but you were almost glad he was drunk because the smell of alcohol reminded you... even if you wanted to do something you'd regret, you couldn't.

God you were so fucking selfish.

He closed his eyes, tilting his head and you ducked your face into his neck. You could feel your heart pounding (indecently) in your chest-

He pulled you into his lap.

This was bad.

This was *bad.*

This was ba-

"Please touch me." He whispered (pathetically). "*Please, please, please I just... I need you to touch me.*"

One hand resting in the small of your back, the other settled at the nape of your neck. His voice reeked of desperation, in no way suave or collected.

"*Please ... I'm so tired of feeling alone... please.*"

"Cronus you're drunk." You replied, placing a hand on his chest and pushing gently. "Even if I wanted to, *which I don't*, but even if I did, it would be wrong."

He let out a whine, "You can't tell me you don't want this too. Why else would you keep sticking around?"

"Because I want to be your friend." You sat up and looked him in the eyes. "I can be your friend without wanting to fuck you."

"But-"

"Cronus," You slid out of his lap. "Do you still want to be my friend even if we never fuck?"

"Well yeah, but-"

"Then I... think we need to have a discussion about boundaries because I think we've both been crossing each other's maybe even without realizing it." You definitely had initiated a lot

of physical contact with him... and maybe that sort of contact wasn't okay by Alternian society. "I think we should communicate like adults." (Yes, good, you sounded like such a mature adult.)

He pouted, bouncing his leg and tapping out a rhythm on the couch with his fingers. "Yeah... okay."

"So I think... That you touching me like that... Where you pulled me close and asked me to touch you. That's a boundary I don't want you crossing. Also telling me about your... uh... masturbatory fantasies about me I think that's a boundary that shouldn't be crossed. I like you as a friend, and I want to remain friends with you, but I also need you to respect me and my choices and respect my boundaries.. Phil and I are committed to each other and it's kind of inconsiderate for you to keep pushing for things despite knowing that. Please no sexual touches from now on." You thought it was a pretty reasonable request.

"Fine...." He responded, but didn't elaborate.

After a minute you continued, "And I also don't want to initiate anything sexual with you when it comes to physical contact. Where are places I should avoid."

He let out a reluctant huff and pointed to a few spots. "Fins, grubscars, crotch...." He fidgetted a bit, mumbling, "As much as I'd love for you to touch me there, you'll probably just end up turning me on and if you're really set on not fucking I guess I'd rather not get turned on and left to go fill my own bucket."

"I also think maybe we should ask each other before initiating physical contact."

He nodded reluctantly.

Okay... good. Maybe things would be okay. Maybe you wouldn't even need to talk to him about that song and make things even more awkward.

"Is it okay if we hug?" You asked after a few seconds. "I want us to be friends on good terms and... yeah. I want us to be good."

He finally looked at you again, nodding, a soft smile on his face. "I'd like that a lot."

You let out a sigh of relief.

But as you went to wrap your arms around him, you brushed up against something sticky. You pulled your hand away from his side, looking at a violet stained palm.

You swallowed.

"Cronus... is this blood?" You asked shakily. "Are you bleeding?"

He studied your hand for a minute, fingers wrapping around your wrist and bringing it up to his nose so he could sniff it. His face scrunched up, and he ran his tongue along your skin (which you absolutely did not find even mildly let alone extremely arousing). "Yeah That's blood alright. Shit... I guess I'm fuckin' bleeding."

"*Fuck."* You whispered, moving quickly to get his stupid leather jacket off. Sure enough underneath, a large violet splotch of congealing blood marked his side. "You get out of that and I'll go find the first aid kit. I'll be right back."

You hopped up off the seat, going to the bathroom just across the hall and grabbing plenty of paper towels and filling up an empty bowl that you were 99% sure was clean (you rinsed it out twice though for good measure) with warm water. When you got back to the room, you took pause, trying not to blush because Damnit, Jim, this was a medical emergency, not a cheap porno.

There was no time to ogle.

You placed the paper towels and bowl on your desk then got the little first aid kit you kept in your desk that had little more than alcohol wipes, some gauze and medical tape, and some bandages.

You could feel his eyes on you, but his voice shook as he let out a nervous laugh, "Y'know, kitten, if I knew all it took for you to want me to strip was a little blood, I would have gotten hurt a lot sooner."

You clicked your tongue, returning to him, face warm as you took him in.

His chest was the same charcoal grey as the rest of his skin, smooth (no nipples, you noted), the sides of his abdomen marked by four thin grooves of a faded grey-violet. However all of his right side was a deep, bruised purple, a large swath of it covered in sticky, congealed violet blood.

He looked awful.

Beautiful, but awful.

"What the hell happened, Cronus?"

He let out a long breath, that soft, slow clicking coming from his chest. "Car hit me," He mumbled out after a while.

Shit. "We need to get you to the hospital dude. You might have internal bleeding."

The shock must have been evident on your face because he flushed, "Relax, kitten, that's where blood's supposed to be. Besides, it'd take a lot more than that to take me out."

That wasn't very reassuring, "They're way more qualified to help yo-"

"I have a medicullizer at home. I promise I'll use it later. Just no hospital okay?"

"Cronus..."

"I ain't going to a hospital."

You weren't really sure how to respond, so you knelt down by his side, wetting the paper towel and began to clean him off. "Did... Didn't they at least stop to check if you were okay?"

You tentatively looked at at him from your spot for a moment, watching him shake his head slowly. God what an awful birthday....

(You should really just give him a pity handj-)

He was drunk for fuck's sake.

(Well obviously he was going to sober up sooner or later-)

You immediately looked back at the blood.

(He'd probably be so grateful he'd start cryi-)

This wasn't the time to think about that!

He was *hurt.* He was hurt and it was his birthday and nobody remembered and sure, maybe he was a massive douche, but that was still such shit luck.... How could you not pity such a pathetic man. You pitied this fool a lot... which you kept to yourself lest you make him feel even worse about himself than he already did.

The blood was mostly dry, clinging to his skin. You had to admit you were a little grossed out (or a lot grossed out) as you cleaned it... but it was his birthday.... How could you leave him to just... bleed? Sure, it had mostly stopped, but....

You looked up at him again. He was watching you with a very intense expression that you couldn't quite place, eyes wide despite his furrowed brow. "You ain't gotta do this you know...." Cronus whispered after a long moment.

"I know." You replied, holding his gaze.

There was something heavy in the air again, something that terrified and exhilarated you down to your core, something you could feel in your bones, and you had to look down. He was drunk... and you already had someone.

Tossing a dirty paper towel in the trash and wetting a new one in the bowl of water, you returned to your work.

"I ain't... I ain't no charity case." His voice wavered.

You nodded, "I know."

"You really shouldn't walk on the roads at night especially in dark leather." You didn't even know how to address the fact that he'd been in a hit and run... if it had been anyone else they probably would have had more than some bruising and cuts.... You... didn't want to think about that. "... Please be more careful."

He didn't respond, but you were almost done. It wasn't as big of a pool as you'd thought... A lot of what you'd thought was dried blood had just been part of the bruising. (Which was quite a relief because you were pretty worried...).

Dabbing up the last of the blood, you pulled out the alcohol wipes, cleaning the actual lacerations and putting some gauze and medical tape on them. "Good as new."

You put a pokemon bandaid on a small cut on his arm and looked back up at him, tapping it.

"Wartortle." You did your best impression of the pokemon, funny voice and everything.

Cronus stared at you, dumbfounded for a minute before breaking out into a grin, the kind so big that it made his eyes squint, as he let out a raucous laugh. "The fuck was that, kitten?"

(And you were unsure if you'd ever seen anything quite so beautiful).

"It's what he sounds like!" You grinned right back. "And he's got lil fins just like you."

He wiped a tear out of the corner of his eye, laugh petering off, grin softening. "Cod I'm so fucking pale for you."

Your mouth opened and closed uselessly for a while, so you busied yourself with cleaning and making sure to wash your hands thoroughly. When you came back into the room he was watching you, face curious.

"You really are just absolute shit with words ain't ya?" That gave you pause, and you swallowed.

You opened your mouth to give him a snappy retort, "I'm just fine with words actually, thank you."

.... God was that really the best snappy retort you could come up with right now?

"'s not what I meant." He replied, pursing his lips. "Like... you're bad at expressing emotions."

"Pshhhhhhhh."

Flawless rebuttal.

He just smiled, patting the seat beside him.

"Put a shirt on."

"You're such a fuckin' prude kitten, holy shit." Cronus just rolled his eyes and put his jacket back on, "Happy now?"

"I'd be happiest if you'd let me take you to a hospital."

"Nooooo...." He whined, making grabby hands until you sat down next to him. "See I feel like new." He nuzzled your shoulder. "Patched me up perfect."

You sighed, settling in and combing your fingers through his hair while you listened to the music blasting from across the street.

He pulled you closer, and you twined your fingers with his (because fuck it, for the first time since the crispmass party you... you didn't feel quite so lonely), the membranes between his fingers odd and stretchy against your skin.

You didn't remember him having them before tonight, and you examined his hand intently. The webbing was a lighter grey than the rest of his skin with a slight purple hue.

"Sorry... forgot to clip that. If it's getting in the way I can just take care of it if you have a pair of scissors."

You regarded him with horror. "What? No. Why?"

"Don't you think it's ugly and alien?"

"Ugly and alien are not synonymous things. Sure, the whole webbed hand thing is alien, but it's certainly not ugly."

There was disbelief in his eyes and you steadied yourself for the massive ego boost you were about to give him. "It's your body, and you have the final say in how to treat it... but I do want you to know that you are incredibly beautiful. Webbing and all."

His hands tightened around yours, and he licked his lips, looking incredibly self conscious. "I- I know that... It was just a test to see if you'd say it sober."

Oh yeah… you had called him pretty at the crispmass party hadn't you….

Neither of you spoke for a time, listening to the heavy beat of the drums and bass. He slumped against you like a sack of potatoes, giggling a little and rubbing his cheek against your shoulder. "You really think that?"

You nodded tiredly, "Yeah."

He giggled some more but didn't say anything else.

And then he began to sing, low and soft. Words too familiar, his thumb rubbing circles on the back of your hand, arm draped around your waist.

"*Black*, r*ed, grey, what can I do to make you stay."*

You swallowed.

"*Or is this pale, baby tell me. Please don't walk away."*

His voice was beautiful... So close you could feel his breath on your skin. A shiver ran down your spine. You needed to stop this.

"*Cause this quadrant confusion has everythin-"*

"No, I'm pretty sure it's 'Party rocker in the house tonight.'" You rasped, recognizing the song that was playing at the party.

He looked at you with a mixture of confusion and offense, and you pointed in the direction of the frat house across the street. "You know... Party rocker in the house tonight... something something gonna have a good time." You sang, incredibly (and self-consciously) aware of how... less good... it was compared to the way he'd been singing just a few seconds ago.

But he gave you a soft look, the kind that made you feel like a little poached egg, and opened his mouth to say something before closing it again.

So you did what any reasonable (~~avoidant~~) human would do in this situation and pulled out your laptop from your bag and pulled up a few wholesome family movies. "Your pick: Kung Fu Panda or Bionicle: Mask of Light." When he just gave you a confused stare, you chose for him. "Kung Fu Panda it is. We're gonna watch some good movies now and hang out because I've been trying to hang out with you for the past month."

"Sounds good to me, chief."

And he seemed pretty invested in it, crying frequently (you weren't sure if it was the movie doing it or just him starting to come down from his trip and being in pain), but it really seemed to set off him off... bawling like a woman at her wedding, pointing at the screen, head in your lap as you carded your fingers through his dense hair. "Th- there's no s- secret ingredient!"

"Because we are all special and wonderful in our own ways." You said, handing him a paper towel.

He blew his nose, silent except for his hiccups after that. You figured you should let him come down from that emotional experience (and you definitely weren't crying) because Kung Fu Panda was a masterpiece and showing him the second one right now might just outright obliterate him.

It took a while for his hiccups to subside, the credits had long since finished rolling... It was almost two in the morning, the frat party next door had wound down, and your filters had long since gone to bed (as you should have too, you had class in the morning)....

You shouldn't ask.

You really shouldn't have asked.

But you did.

In the eerie quiet of your office, you whispered out. "Cronus?"

He made a noise of acknowledgment.

"Have you ever killed anyone?"

You weren't sure what possessed you to ask, but as the words left your mouth, you immediately regretted it.

He went rigid against you.

After a few moments he spoke, "Which answer do you want to hear?"

"I'm sorry." You said hastily. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

He was silent for a looooooong while. Long enough that you were pretty sure he wasn't going to speak to you again for your impudence (you honestly wouldn't blame him). You gave him a respectable amount of time and just as you were about to ask if he was comfortable enough to go home, he spoke,

"Most trolls don't ever get a chance to meet their ancestors.... They usually die before we're ever hatched, but highbloods are built different. We live a long fuckin' time, and the Orphaner was the only adult allowed on-planet, so I get why Danny and pops idolized him. But they never met him... he was an inebriated, bitter, miserable, crusty old man. I get that I was supposed to be the next Orphaner. I get that it was my duty to the empire. But when I had the gun in my hands I choked like a big fuckin' just-hatched grub."

You weren't quite sure what to say to that.

"Because... because I was supposed to save the fucking universe. And how could I save the universe if I was killing people's lususes?"

You papped his cheek because you weren't sure how to respond. You didn't know what answer you expected, but knowing that he was too soft for it made you feel a little like a poached egg again. Soft and gooey and for just a moment, you didn't mind it.

"He said he would have culled me himself for being so weak, but he was so tired of being on a planet with a bunch of children and that when the time came for me to take his place he'd finally be free." He paused, "Sometimes I wish he'd gone through with it. I used to tell people sometimes. It was the only time they'd pay attention to me. But no one does anymore...."

"Cronus..."

"They thought I'd never go through with it... and they were right. I'm too much of a coward to do it myself."

"Well," You replied, fingers curling in his hair. "I'm glad you're a coward. I'd miss you."

He chuckled, "You'd be the only one."

"So?"

"I'm glad I haven't driven you away yet."

You booped his nose and he gently bit the tip of your finger in retaliation, nowhere enough to actually hurt, but he held your finger between his teeth, smiling up at you. There was something so intimate about the moment that you had to stop yourself from bending down to-

"You feeling okay enough to go home now?"

Cronus sighed, releasing your finger and nodding. "Yeah, I think I am."

You helped him up, steadying him and tugging him along back to the car.

It was a quiet ride, you were pretty sure he fell asleep (you really were trying your best not to), and when you got him back to his hive, he whispered a soft, "Thanks, I had a lot of fun."

You put his hand to your lips and kissed it. "Happy wriggling day, Cronus."

He leaned over and kissed your forehead in response. "You wanna stay the night?"

Ye-

You shook your head, knowing that he was sobering up and thoughts in your head had started to revolt against your better senses.... You weren't trustworthy in this position.

He pouted, "Drive safe then, okay?"

"Yeah."

You waited until he was in the house before you drove off into the night.

You'd followed Cronus down to the basement after your session with Eridan... something about watching a movie together. Despite the light outside and the thin windows to the outside along the top of the walls, it was completely dark, but warm and familiar. The coolness of his hand was a balm against your own.

You sat for a while, talking, playing Super Smash Bros while some Hallmark played on in the background. You beat him for the fifth consecutive game.

"Wow, dude, you suck at this!"

You laughed, and in retaliation he grabbed you, pinning you down.

"Who sucks now?" He flashed you a cheeky grin.

"Still you."

He waggled his eyebrows, "You know I'll suck something for you."

And you did something you probably shouldn't have, but goddamn something about being pinned down was doing something to you that was less than decent.

"Oh really?"

God you shouldn't encourage him....

He bit his lip, ducking lower until his nose was bumping your own, and he rocked his hips, grinding against you, "I'll do a lot more 'n that, kitten."

"Then what's stopping you?" You wrapped you legs around his waist and bucked up against him and he groaned.

His lips crashed against yours, hands releasing you to pull you closer, one at the back of your head, the other groping your ass. He broke to whisper out your name, "Fuck, I want you so bad, kitten."

Your fingers curled in his hair and brought his mouth back to yours, nipping at his bottom lip. He kissed a trail down to your neck, tongue sliding over your skin as he fumbled with the button on your jeans.

"Want you so bad. *Fuck.* I need you, babe." His breath was cool against your throat, hand finally slipping into your pants and teasing at the waistband of your under-

You woke up in a cold sweat.

Rich as Sin

Chapter Summary

In which you find yourself in many, many uncomfortable predicaments

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, sorry this took so long.... It clocks in at 16k words though so enjoy!
Also a massive thank you to every single one of you who has encouraged me, drawn fanart, made playlists, translated this into another language! You are all amazing and you keep me engaged with my own story so thank you

As soon as the door to your office opened, Annuum stopped dead in their tracks. Immediately opening their mouth and taking a whif of the air, sniffing with a disgruntled, disgusted look on their face like a cat who had just smelled a particularly pungeant sock.As they wandered around the room, looking incredibly alarmed, they turned to you and said, "I knew you were having difficulty with your fishy-friends advances, but I didn't think you'd actually kill him. Kudos to you though; Seadwellers are a pain in the ass to take down. But by the fucking horrorterrors, you are awful at covering up your tracks. Do you need help with the body?"

You finished the coffee that was already in your mouth, almost becoming used to language like that (*almost*). "I didn't kill him. He was bleeding, and I took care of his wounds."

"And here I thought you didn't want to be moirails." They snorted.

"We're not. He was hurt and I wanted to help."

"Okay, tell that to the legislacerators when they come looking for him." They gave you an easy smile. Annuum must have seen the look on your face because they immediately added, "I'm joking."

You gave them a nod.

"In all seriousness though, it *reeks* in here. I can't work in these conditions."

"Fine, fine. I'll clean it up a little bit better and bleach everything."

"Thank you."

You weren't quite sure what to expect when you arrived outside the Ampora's hive for the first time since you'd found Cronus on the side of the road in shambles like the fucking prodigal son he was. Except that you were pretty sure his father hadn't been forgiving and loving when he'd returned.... Though honestly you weren't really sure about his whole 'parent' situation was.

They called it a lusus, but honestly it was just a giant white flying seahorse that gave you very disapproving looks. Apparently both of them could understand it, but it kind of still gave you the creeps. Something about the way it watched you while you tutored Eridan made alarms go off in your head.

Thank god you'd never been alone in a room with it.

Fuck... you just jinxed yourself didn't you.

You steeled yourself for a moment before heading up the steps to their door, and before you could even knock, it opened.

.... You were relieved... and nervous.... Probably because you were just thinking about their lusus. It certainly didn't have anything to do with the way your heart jumped (with friendship) when you met Cronus' eyes and he positively beamed at you.

And before you could react, he pulled you into a hug, just loose enough to be a little awkward like he still wasn't quite sure of how much pressure to exert (god what a clinical fucking way to think about a hug... no wonder Phil accused you of having all of the emotional depth of a spork) but it was sweet nonetheless and you hugged him back.

"Feeling any better today?" You mumbled into his t-shirt.

"Now that you're here I am."

God fucking damnit.... It was so sincere and sweet and cornier than a highway in Iowa and despite rolling your eyes you were really glad that your face was buried in his chest because you could feel yourself blush.

Which was stupid because this was *Cronus* and you were going to get a headache from his cologne any minute now. ... And what would Eridan think if he saw you and Cronus hugging?? Like Scandelous Harlots??? You pulled away, not at all reluctantly because why would you be reluctant about it? Laughably preposterous.

It was just a byproduct of that dream you'd had.

Yeah. That was it.

Just a weird dream that you'd had that you kept thinking about.

That you really wished you could stop thinking about.

Like god fucking damn you wished you could just... take all of that and throw it in the brain garbage for things you didn't want to remember.

Google said you were fine.

Forums said it was normal to have.... *lurid* dreams about people other than your partner.

That it didn't mean anything.

Because it didn't mean anything. You were just.... trying to process everything that had happened that night and spat out that shit-show .

But you could viscerally feel the way his teeth had dragged over your-

No. You weren't thinking about this.

You didn't quite meet his eyes, "Well , I'm glad you're doing better. You were kind of fucked up and I was..." Worried? " *Concerned.* "

He just flashed you an easy smile, a comfortable smile that sort of put you at ease , and said with a shrug, "Eh. I would have been okay."

You weren't so sure, but you weren't about to argue with him because Eridan would be down here any minute and you... hadn't been sleeping well.

You weren't entirely sure you could blame it on that dream either.... There was just something....

"We should hang out tonight."

You willed yourself to say something instead of just standing there with an awkward smile on your face, but your mouth opened and closed uselessly.... And the way his face slowly started to fall yanked hard enough at your heart that you said, "I have a lot to do, but I think I can manage a little while if you don't mind m e looking through some lab reports."

Fortunately you had just come from one of your classes so you had a whole slew of them stuffed in your bag.

Cronus' beam was infectious.

Eridan had a grype call he needed to get to right after the session so he made a relatively hasty exit leaving you alone with Cronus. "Do you wanna hang out downstairs? It's probably more comfortable."

You remembered very vividly the way you'd broken down in front of him while he was drunk and the way you'd wanted so badly to just let go and you.... You weren't sure if you should trust yourself... which was silly because of course you could trust yourself. So despite your long (probably awkward) pause you nodded and he beamed and you felt an uncomfortable pang in your chest like you just swallowed too much bread with a too- dry throat.

Cronus grabbed your hand and led you down the stairs to his dude cavern (and you tried to ignore just how many doors there were in the hallway because how... how were there that many rooms in the basement level? What was in them? Was one of them a sex dungeon? Probably! But you were far too polite to ask... though you really wouldn't want to ask about that last one.... yeah.... Much better to not wonder *or* wander).

It was still as dimly lit as you remembered it the first time, but the soft light of the day outside filtered in through thin, horizontal windows up towards the ceiling and something about it gave you the sense of deja vu, except for the massive pile of pillows and blankets in one corner.

"So do you wanna watch a movie, cheif? Or maybe just talk?" He gave you a blinding smile and you quickly averted your eyes, catching quickly on the bizarre pile. Surely he didn't just take every pillow and cushion and blanket in the house and make a nest out of them did he? Was that normal behavior? Or was he like... just a bit messy? (After all he was rich, he could afford to not care about messes because he could just pay people to clean up after him. Something you would have loved to be able to do. Fuck doing dishes.) "D'you like it?"

"Like what?" You replied. *His p-*

"My pile. Do you like it?" Cronus looked at you with equal parts excitement and anxiousness.

"Uhhhh..." You tried to glean what answer he wanted from you by reading his face. "Yyyeeees?"

That was apparently all he needed to hear before he rushed over and flopped down on it, patting his lap and watched you expectantly. You just gave him what you hoped was a withering look and he patted the space beside him instead. You debated for a moment whether or not to sit on next to him in that monument to decadence and comfort or sit on the couch like a normal person but he was giving you puppy dog eyes and he really was awfully cute. (Can we keep him?) So despite your hesitance and better judgement you flopped down on the pile.

It was extraordinarily plush.

You sank in the perfect amount.

This was... this was quite nice actually.

"Can we cuddle a little?" He asked.

"Okay, but not too-"

Cronus immediately wrapped an arm around your waist and pulled you flush to his side. You pushed him away equally as quickly because, "Damn, leave some fucking room for Jesus, will you?"

If the confused look he gave you was anything to go by, the reference clearly went over his head. But the sentiment behind the statement rung true. You needed *some* personal space.

"What's wrong, kitten? You ain't feelin' good?" He reached out to stroke your cheek, hand cold (always cold) but they kept it so goddamn warm in here that it wasn't the temperature of it that was the issue. It was the presumptuousness of it all.

Wrong? Nothing was wrong. You were fine. You just needed some personal space because he was massive and smothering and you were... god between the pillows and blankets pulling you in and the clinginess of the man beside you you were... fuck you couldn't even breathe.

He cradled your face in his hands, making soft shooshing sounds and a few high, warbling clicks. "You ain't gotta hold anyfin in on the pile." The expression on his face was gentle... the sort of gentle way one would look at a baby deer; with all the tenderness in the world and you hated how vulnerable it made you feel and you were going to fucking scream.

No.

No. You were fine.

You focused on the way your nails dug crescents into your palm.

"I'm fine. I just need a little personal space is all."

Cronus pouted but you had no intention of giving him more than that. You hated feeling poached eggy. (Though truth be told you felt... you felt more like a fried egg. Crinkly and crispy around the edges. Chewier, less soft... you weren't even sure if you had a gooey center right now).

"You don't gotta be shy, chief, you can tell me anything." He tried again. "That's what piles are great for: feelings jams, secret sessions, y'know pink shit." You squinted at him, trying to figure out if he was trying to insult you (why would he though...). "Geez, kitten, no need to get hostile here, you were super into sharing the other night."

You winced.

"That was... an exception, not the rule. Besides, I'm okay, really."

He didn't look convinced, but finally changed the subject. "So, my therapist says that I should take more interest in the things that other people are interested in."

You held back your derisive snort because of course you were supposed to take interest in what other people liked... that was just part of living in a society, but he was new at the whole 'being a decent person' thing and you appreciated him actually trying to get to know you and not just get into your pants.

"Well," You started, "I like fungus , but you probably knew that already." He nodded attentively. "I also like gardening and plants. In fact there's plans to put in a community garden just a couple of blocks from my apartment so I'm hoping that I'll be able to square away a little plot maybe grow some eggplants and peppers."

Cronus squeezed your hand, leaning in and knocking his forehead gently against your temple. "If you want you can always garden here, kitten. Could be a fun bonding activity."

Fun bonding activity... That was almost definitely from his therapist, but on god was the offer tempting.

Not that you would....

Even though you wanted it more than almost anything.

The simplicity of tending a pumpkin plant and looking over and seeing Cronus picking tomatoes, giving you a sharky smile as he caught you watching him was... a very slippery sloap you weren't willing to tackle.

"Something tells me you're not the gardening type." You chuckled. Because he kind of wasn't. He was a prissy little rich dude who'd probably never gotten his hands actually dirty in his life... though the thought of teaching him... guiding his hands to correctly stake a tomato plant... watching the wonder in his eyes when the first zucchini reached the size of your forearm.... You bit the inside of your cheek.

No... he probably wouldn't care. He'd probably think your enthusiasm was weird, and you forced your heart to sink.

Cronus just gave you a look, "I can be whatever the fuck you want me to be."

You rolled your eyes and shoved him. "I want you to be yoursel-" You caught yourself "I want you to be a less awful version of yourself."

He hummed and rested his head on your shoulder. "What else?"

"I dunno," You shrugged. "Maybe less flirty with me."

"Impossible." He replied immediately. "But I mean like, what else are you into?"

"Well, I like playing video games."

He straightened up a bit, eyes sparkling with excitement. "What kind?"

"I really enjoy roleplaying and survival type games a lot, but I don't have a lot of time. Normally I just play some minecraft or a couple of rounds of Overwatch with Phil." That was how you'd met, actually. In a random match in voice chat on the rare occassion you didn't feel too weird about chatting with strangers, and you'd hit it off with all of them. Formed a friend group, which (of course) fell apart within a few years, but you and Phil still got along really well, and... dating just seemed the natural progression of things. So, you'd asked him out, and

here you were several months later, still playing minecraft together.... So what if you felt a pang of dread when he suggested you move your stuff into his base? That was normal, right?

He was just moving too fast.

"That sounds like a lot of fun. Maybe we could play some games together sometime!" He grinned at you. "I have a couple of games around here somewhere that I used to play with my friends back when we were wrigglers. I think they blocked me though because I stopped seein' them online after a while.... I'm pretty sure they still play though. What games do you play? I'll go get them so we can play together."

You listed off a couple, then gave him your gamer tag.

"This ain't a fake, right?" He asked, and a pang of guilt ran through your gut.

"It's real. Promise."

Cronus practically vibrated in excitement, immediately taking out his phone, "Do you know if Scream is compatible with you guys' version of it? Or is this for Disgored?"

"You should be able to find me on most gamer platforms, but I've never heard of those."

"Okay, I think I found you on Scream." He held out his phone to you for you to confirm, and yeah, that was definitely your gamer tag and your profile icon. The layout looked a lot like Steam... maybe a crossplatform kind of thing. Steam and Scream.

You didn't have it on your phone, but you did have your laptop with you so you pulled it open and accepted the friend request. "There we go. It's official; we are now gamer friends."

When a notification popped up from Phil you immediately slammed your laptop shut.

You weren't doing anything wrong. Nope. You were just having a friendly hangout with your newest bonefied- no wait... uh... legitimate (much better, no boning here, no sir) friend. It's just that if you started talking now when you were hanging out with Cronus it would be weird. You didn't want to make things weird right? Right.

And Phil had been extra pushy lately about moving your minecraft base to his and joining the two with a joint bed, and you didn't have time to deal with that....

But now that your fishy little friend had your gamer tag and you were going to play games together there was a very real possibility of Cronus and Phil interacting, and by god you were not looking forward to it .

Maybe you were just being too pessimistic though. Maybe they'd hit it off and be great friends and then Phil would start hanging out with Cronus more and Cronus would start hanging out with Phil and you would be left in the dust to deal with work and school and students and gut wrenching lone-

Cronus rested his chin on your shoulder, looking at you intently. "I can't wait to play with you."

And somehow you couldn't really imagine that happening.

You turned your head to face him, uncomfortably aware of just how close you were to one another... if you leaned in even an inch.... "Yeah, it'll be a lot of fun." You breathed out.

"Good, it's settled then." His eyes lingered on your lips for a moment too long before he pulled back, looking a couple of games up and purchasing them. "Now we can play together whenever you want!"

You checked the time on your phone... Shit. It had only been fifteen minutes since you'd started the hangout. There was no way you could just back out and go home now. That would be incredibly rude. But the way his arm wrapped around you was making you feel all soft again. Soft like warm banana bread.

God, why did you have to be such a touch-starved idiot?

He pulled you closer and you let him because even though it felt wrong, it felt more right ; And you knew it was just the oxytocin talking, the instinctual need for human (or, well, troll) contact. It was nice to simply exist in the same space as someone else.

Cronus put on a cheesy hallmark movie on the TV about a man who made sub-par bread except for when he was in love, and how when he was in love the bread was so good that it saved the town. And as far as Hallmark movies went it was actually pretty funny, but you did your best to grade labs while your little shuckboy friend looked over your shoulder and kept asking you questions.

And even though your time wasn't one hundred percent as productive as it could have been, it had still been quite enjoyable. You'd even managed to get about half of the papers graded. Sure, maybe you'd have to stay up a little later so you could spend time with your boyfriend too, but such was the price of popularity.

You hadn't gotten more than a game into your date night with Phil when Cronus messaged you asking to join.

"C'mon, it'll be fun. I promise." (You hoped). You said, trying your best to be charming. And after a few go-arounds, Phil finally acquiesced.

"I reserve the right to kick him out if he does anything creepy." Phil grumbled.

"Of course! I wouldn't have it any other way."

And with that you went ahead and invited him to your group.

Immediately Cronus said one of the dumbest things he possibly could. "Hey, Kitten, ready to make some sweet, sweet music?"

"I'm giving you exactly one second to reconsider your phrasing ." Phil quickly snapped, and you could hear the sputtering on the other end of your troll friend's mic.

"I guess you gotta be Phil." His sleazy pseudo-Brooklyn accent was slick as oil and thick as pine tar, even more pronouncedly exaggerated in this audio-only format. A true caricature of himself. "How you doin', chief?"

Phil didn't respond at first but then said a begrudging, "I'm okay, thanks."

"Cool... cool... anyways," Cronus continued, "Good to finally meet you. "

"Wish I could say the same-" Phil mumbled into the mic, but you cut him off.

"Who's ready to kick some ass?" You tried to sound as enthusiastic as possible.

Cronus made a weird glubbing noise , "You know I'm always ready. Wink."

"Is he always this disgusting?" Phil just sighed, and you took that as a go-ahead and put yourself in queue.

"Only around new people. I'm trying to train him." You replied without missing a beat and Phil snorted.

"I'd let you train me anyda-"

"Oh my god."

"I'm gonna need you both to stop or else you're gonna throw off my fucking groove." You said.

Blessed silence met your ears.

Of course your little shuckboy decided to misbehave again after a minute , "So, kitten, I really enjoyed hanging out tod-"

"You hung out with him and you didn't tell me?" Phil interjected, an edge to his voice.

"I didn't exactly get the chance, now did I?" You replied.

Fortunately the match started before he could say anything else.

"So, uh... I ain't ever played this game before. What do I do?" Cronus said shyly.

"You pick a character then you fight the other team to secure the point." You picked your healer main, wishing the opposing team with a customary 'GLHF'.

Phil picked his main and Cronus picked the sniper.

"Don't fuck up." Phil sneered into the mic, leaving no room to the imagination as to how he felt about your friend.

"Whatever, chief."

"Phil, behave please." You were met with silence.

And you quickly learned that Cronus, while a massive fuck up in a plethora of ways, was one hell of a sniper. You had no idea how many headshots he hit, but he was constantly in the kill feed.

Phil kept needling him, and Cronus would flirt with him back which in turn just made Phil madder. You both regretted having brought him into your gaming fold, and were overjoyed at the prospect of winning consistently.

After a few matches, you told him goodnight, closing out the group and heading back into a private call with Phil.

"I don't like him." He said immediately. "He's obnoxious."

"Well... yeah, a little. But he's harmless." You replied.

"He kept flirting with you!"

"He was flirting with you too! And the enemy team. It's what he does. He doesn't mean anything by it." You snapped. Because by the nine fucking divines you were too tired to deal with this petty jealous shit. "Look. He's my friend. I'm not into him, and he knows that."

Your intestines tied themselves into knots.

"That's some bull fucking shit, but you know what? I'm not the one in the wrong here, so I'm going to leave."

He logged off, leaving you alone with an uncomfortable feeling in your gut.

You'd taken to playing together pretty frequently after that; You, Cronus, and Phil. They bickered, you kept them in line, and when it was over Phil would bitch to you about how much he despised Cronus.

It had become a bit of a routine.

You'd taken to tuning most of Phil's complaints out.

"Babe, he literally challenged me to an honorable duel among men for your hand in 'human matrimony' five minutes ago and called me a bitch, a coward, and I think he accused me of having erectile dysfunction when I refused. So don't be mad, but he was pissing me off and I sent him a dick pick. I thought it would be better if you heard it from me, and not him being a whiny little snitch."

You knew you should be mad. And you probably would be if you weren't laughing so hard. "Oh my fucking god, Phil."

"It was to *prove a point* !"

A message popped up on your screen from Cronus.

CA: vwell vwell vwelvwell

CA: your lovwing boyfriend just sent me a rather lew v d picture

CA: of his human penis

"I think he sent one back, but I honestly can't tell. You wanna see it?"

"I don't want to know what the hell my friend's junk looks like."

"It might honestly just be abstract art... It's just a purple squiggle on a grey background."

That definitely sounded like an alien dick pic.... Not that you would know. You very much did not want to know what Cronus' junk looked like. Because he was your friend. Nothing else. And even thinking about him in that way....

You just didn't.

You'd never.

(You were vaguely aware of Phil saying something about getting another one, but you were concentrating pretty hard on not being curious (in a purely scientific and platonic way)).

It would be inappropriate to imagine your friends naked especially when you already had a significant other who loved you very much and trusted you. And yes maybe... maybe you *had* had a dream once that wasn't fully... *pure*. But that didn't mean anything at all. And it wasn't like you could control your dreams... and besides multiple websites had said that it didn't count as cheating and was perfectly fine and not a symptom of anything wrong in your relationship.

"Hey uh... how tall is this dude by the way... not for any particular reason?"

"I dunno, like seven feet at least I think, but he's going through a 'post molt growth spurt' or something along those lines so I honestly don't even fucking know anymore."

Phil let out a strangled sound.

"Why do you ask?"

"Jesus fucking christ... wow. That's... anyways. Don't get me wrong it's really gross especially knowing he has all of those teeth and gills and webbed shit and those creepy yellow eyes like some sort of fucking lizard, but I gotta admit if I'm looking at what I *think* I'm looking at-"

"Phil, I'm gonna need you to stop talking about my friend's junk like... right fucking now."

"Why? Aren't you two really close now ? You really haven't seen his gross alien co-"

"Dude, I'm gonna end the call if you keep this up."

"Babe, it literally doesn't even look like a dick though."

"Phil-"

"Aren't they supposed to be like... bugs or something? That's so fucked up, babe. He's trying to fuck you with that thing. He's literally trying to stick that gross bug -"

You hung up before he had the chance to finish his sentence.

You warned him.

You warned him to stop.

You *warned him to stop or you'd hang up.*

(So why the hell did you feel so awful)

...Sure, maybe Cronus was an insect... alien... bug(?), but he was also still a person and-

CA: understandable because I am the epitome of both human and troll physical perfection

CA: vwell endowved in both body and musical talent > ;)

CA: but if you can't trust him not to go around sending pictures of his (much less impressivwe than mine) phallus then maybe it vwould be best for evweryone invwolwved if you twvo vwent separate vways.

CA: and by separate vways I mean finding a more suitable and trustvworthy human relationship partner vwho is sensitivwe and most definitely a great and highly experienced lovwer

RR: and by that you mean you :/

CA: vwoah vwoah vwouvowah cheif I nevwer evwen said that

CA: But I am all of those things *vwink* ;)

RR: You do realize that I'm talking to him right now, right? I already knew you goaded him into sending you one

RR: Cronus we talked about this.

RR: Respecting me and my decision also includes not trying to break phil and i up.

RR: We *talked* about this, remember?

RR: You gave me your word .

You were met with silence.

God you couldn't fucking deal with either of them right now. You logged off your computer and went back to grading lab reports where sure things didn't make sense half the time, but at least... at least.....

You closed your laptop and went to bed.

It was strange, you had to admit, waiting like a normal person at the Ampora hive door. In fact you'd been waiting several minutes already. Which okay, fine, wasn't the worst thing in the world, but it was very different from what you were used to... like when you'd given Cronus a fake number and he'd avoided you for a month.

You were pretty sure you were still cool.

He was probably just holed up in the bathroom or something.

It was odder still when Eridan was the one to greet you at the door a few minutes after that.... Okay, it was fine. This was different but you didn't mind.... Sure, maybe you did look forward to a little bit of banter and some casual touching but it wasn't as though you couldn't go without.

However when the session was already three quarters of the way over and you hadn't seen Cronus at all, you actually began to worry that maybe, somehow you'd upset him.... It was the only working theory you had (or that he was too sick to get out of bed and oh nooo you'd need to make him soup).

But your curiosity compelled you to ask, "Hey, I haven't seen Cronus, is everything alright?"

He shot you a mildly disgusted look, "You know you don't have to pretend to like him, right?"

You just rolled your eyes.

"I think he's probably still preparing for his date tonight so at least you're not alone in your poor taste I guess."

"Oh."

....

Date?

Cronus Ampora... had managed to find himself a date?

"That's nice." You responded after a too-long pause. Because it *was* nice. And you were *proud* of him for finding someone who was willing to go out with him even though you were a little concerned.... (For yourself or for him?)

Not that there was anything to be concerned about... Cronus was a big boy who could take care of himself... but he was also rich and naive and desperate and what if someone was trying to take advantage of hi-

But that wasn't your concern... not really. You just were a little... protective is all. After all... friends looked out for one another.

And if you couldn't look out for him then... then what kind of friend were you? But... you were happy for him. You really were. Because Cronus wasn't a bad guy once you broke through that awful persona he projected... though admittedly you hadn't seen that persona in a while. Maybe he'd stopped altogether.

Yeah.

Maybe he was genuinely less of an ass around other people too now. (Okay that was definitely a lie... he was definitely still a little prick whenever you guys played with other people. Especially Phil.)

You did your best to be excited for him (because you were very excited for him) and to keep your head in the game because Eridan was taking one of those alphabet standardized tests (ACT or PSAT or something silly along those lines) this weekend and he needed all the help he could get. You'd even agreed to tutor him tomorrow because he'd pestered you about it (and you were a softy... also money. If you could quit teaching undergrad students and just be a full time tutor for this kid you were positive you'd make more per year than what you did now but alas....).

By the time the session was over, you were pretty sure you'd processed the information enough that you were no longer in total shock, and Eridan seemed satisfied with what you'd taught him and scuttled off to his room, devouring the study sheets you'd printed out for him.

...In the reading sense. Not with his mouth.

You took your time gathering up all of your items. There was no reason not to. And when you finally picked up your bag and headed out of the room, you turned your head, catching a glimpse of Cronus, fiddling with a deep violet bow tie looking completely out of his depth . You stopped as his eyes met yours and you gave him a soft smile. "You nervous for your date?"

One step at a time, you made your way over to him . He really did look quite lovely dressed up in a simple lilac button up and black slacks, a pocket square the same shade of purple as the bow tie folded in his breast pocket.

"I swear I wanted to tell you but you haven't been online." He mumbled nervously, but you just reached up, straightening his bowtie. A soft almost gurgling hum bubbled from his throat that reminded you of something that might come from a dolphin.

"I'm so happy for you." You replied... and you were, you decided. You were very firmly happy for him and feeling so incredibly like a poached egg it wasn't even funny.

Soft.

A little jiggly.

Warm.

You pinched a wrinkle out of his pocket square and smoothed it down, fingers lingering on his chest for a moment. His hand closed around yours as you pulled away and you looked up, eyes locking on his, an expression of nervousness and something you couldn't put a name to (couldn't? or didn't want to?) on his face. "You're gonna do just fine."

He swallowed, hands clammy against your skin, looking very much like he wanted to say something but couldn't quite get the words out. You reached up and patted his cheek, thumb swiping over a freckle. Cronus leaned into the touch, breath leveling.

"What if he doesn't like me?"

"Then he can go fuck himself both literally and figuratively." He laughed at that. "Tell me about him." You said after a moment. "If you have time that is."

He checked his phone and took another deep breath. "Well... he's an indigo," He said as though you knew what it meant and you nodded along like you understood, "He's really into music , apparently he's made quite a few lowbloods' careers . "

You nodded. So they had a shared interest. Good. Something to talk about on the date. Between Cronus looking Like That and sparkling conversation, maybe it would even be a pretty good date. Maybe it would even turn into a relationship. Maybe he'd stop flirting with you. Maybe after that he'd stop wanting to hang out so much.... Like your friends did in highschool whenever they found a romantic interest.... Like they did in college too....

Nope.

Nope.

Nope.

You were happy for him. Firmly happy for him. You weren't going to think about that at all.

" Just relax a little bit... it's gonna be okay. He's probably just as nervous as you are. Just... do what feels right."

"Can I just bring you along and you can hype me up?" He gave you a hopeful little smile and you just shook your head because somehow the thought of being third wheel on a confirmed date sounded exactly like the most uncomfortable thing you could possibly do with your very limited free time .... Having to sit there hyping him up over some troll's goo goo eyes....

You patted his hand and pulled away. "You're gonna do just fine."

"Yeah...." He replied. "Yeah, you're right. You usually are. I'm gonna do fuckin' great and I'll get so much nook my bulge'll be clown fuckin' grape jelly for days."

You were quite grateful you had only a gist of what that meant and you gave Cronus a tight lipped smile, papping his cheek really quick.

His fins fluttered and he looked so much like he wanted to say something, but instead he just checked his phone again. "Shit... I should probably finish getting ready ."

"Yeah, and I should probably head out ." You mumbled, finally moving from your spot and heading for the door while he stood there looking a little lost.

And as the door closed behind you, you couldn't help but sigh.

As you pulled up to their hive once more the next day, you saw Cronus Ampora, looking mildly disheveled, dark circles under his eyes more pronounced sitting hunched over on his stoop, a half empty bottle in his hand. He looked up as he heard your car door shut , a sour expression on his face.

"I want you to know that I hate you." He said as you approached, taking another swig from his bottle.

"Oh?" You replied, doing your best to remain level headed despite the fact that you felt sick to your stomach.

"I was perfectly fine until you came along.... And... and now it's like I don't even know me anymore, y'know? You fucking gave me standards or some shit." He looked torn between pouting and moping and being legitimately upset. "I just... we were getting hot and heavy, real worked up and shit, and I was gonna get fucking laid and then it just... didn't *feel* right. And all I could think about was you asking me if I liked him and I... just...."

You sat down next to him and gave him a sympathetic smile. "Well do you?"

"No!" He ran his hand through his hair. "Cod fucking damn I just... all he wanted to talk about was lowblood rights but in like a really weird way and it was kind of offputting. And a few perigees ago I wouldn't a cared, and I hate that I even thought about whether or not I like him." He let out a sigh with a cicada buzz undertone and looked into your eyes, lower lip trembling in a pout. "I was gonna get laid."

"Well sex isn't everything." You laughed.

He just scoffed, rolling his eyes, but when he finally met your gaze again they were full of affection and you let out a mental sigh. He batted his eyelashes at you, "You gonna make it up to me, Kitten? That why you're here?" Cronus sidled closer , resting his head on your shoulder. After a moment he nuzzled into you collarbone, hand sliding down to grip your hip (palm firmly planted against your ass) as he nudged himself closer still . " How about this ... " He practically purred in what he probably thought was a sultry tone, but sultry was very difficult to do when your name was Cronus Ampora and you smelled overwhelmingly like a mixture between a Calvin Klein perfume department and a bottle of Everclear . "I take you upstairs right now to my block 'nd we make some sweet, sweet music with our bodies."

You should probably stop him talking, but your mouth was pretty dry. "Cronus... you already know-"

"I'll turn down the lights nice 'n low 'nd I'll make you feel so good. We'll both feel *so good* , kitten."

You swallowed. smacked his arm, and when he looked up at you to pout, you flicked his forehead as hard as you could. "That is exactly what I mean about boundaries."

His face scrunched up, and you flicked him again.

" Don't be such a rude boy." You grumbled.

"How about you teach me some manners then, daddy?"

All of the breath left your body in a single monumental wheeze quickly followed by you doubling over on yourself and laughing hysterically. You disentangled yourself from him, ruffling his hair despite his protests. "I have to go help Eridan now." You stood up, catching his eye one more time. "And for what it's worth, I'm proud of you. For having standards."

You scurried into his hive, very aware that your cheeks were warm.

You rolled your eyes. "Really? We get to hang out like twice a week."

"Yeah. I think I want to play alone right now." Phil grumbled, voice uncommonly cold.

He was being ridiculous. All you wanted to do was not play healer today. So what if you sucked at playing DPS , it was fun. You wanted to have fun.... And now your wonderful, loving boyfriend was being a massive goober and rage quitting on you.

Maybe you were a great healer. So what? Sometimes you just wanted to go apeshit. But if he was going to be a baby about it, fine. He could go play on his own.

You had things to do anyway... it didn't matter.

So when he logged out of the chat you debated just getting some work done, but you were honestly pretty burned out. So you just continued to play for a little while. Playing a few dps games, dying a lot, and *trying* to enjoy yourself at least a little bit.

A ping interrupted your gaming.

CA: Mind if I join you?

So you invited Cronus to your pitiful little party of one.

"Hey, kittens, how you guys doin'?" His voice came in over your headphones. "Oh where's your boyfriend?"

"Phil's throwing a hissy fit because I'm not playing healer today ." You replied, queuing the two of you up for a match.

"Trouble in-" He cut himself off. "I'm sorry he's being a dick." He amended with the least sorry voice you could imagine.

"Yeah... you chill with me playing dps? Warning you right now that I suck."

"So?" He snorted. "Who cares? It's a stupid human game for dumb wrigglers."

You snickered, "Exactly!"

The character select screen came up and you chose the edgiest character you could.

"'Sides. I really only play for you." You could hear the clicking in his voice and your heart fluttered a little bit in your chest.

"You flirt." You grinned.

"You tease." Cronus shot back.

You blew a raspberry into the mic.

He laughed (and you did your best to ignore your insides squirming). "I don't know how Phil puts up with this abuse. Such an awful sound."

"It's payback."

"I haven't ever even done anything, chief. Never even!"

You just laughed in response, your kill stolen by a well timed headshot. Fuck... he was so much better at DPS than you were it wasn't even funny. He actually had aim. You definitely weren't a little bit jealous about that at all. Because you were a healer main.... And a damn good one at that.

And it was fun kicking back and being bad at DPS while your alien (*your* alien? When had that started? When had you become so possessive.... He wasn't yours any more than you were his. And... and you weren't his) kicked serious ass.

And flamed the other team.... and got super salty.... It was honestly a lot of fun watching chat devolve and him lose his cool. He said some very unkind things but he didn't say any slurs, human or troll, so you counted that as a win even though you lost most (all) of the games.

It was an unseasonably cool day, a cold front had moved in and everything had gotten pretty chilly for the past week. You'd spent most of the morning holed up in the greenhouse with Annuum, and returned there after your noontime lab. Which honestly should have been a lot warmer, you would have been more concerned about your samples, but you knew they were pretty hardy. And with climate change and the increasing unpredictability of the weather well... maybe it was almost better that they experienced a little bit so you could test them a little more rigorously.

You also just liked telling yourself shit apparently.

Fortunately, apparently there were discussions about what could be done about it going on with the alien empire but things were very slow moving with the empire in disarray. Annuum liked to tell you about it. They kept up with that sort of stuff....

They kept up with a lot of stuff.... Honestly they might as well have been one of the informed people you knew. Which given your high opinion of the people you considered friends but hadn't talked to in months or even years... (yikes it really had been years since you'd spoken to Meixing or Collins hadn't it? Smashmouth was right... the years start comin' and they don't stop comin') was pretty high praise . But Annuum was a different kind of smart in that sage sort of way where they just... *knew* shit. About almost everything. Or at least it felt like it sometimes.

But maybe it was just because you didn't know shit about troll stuff even though you kept meaning to look it up.... You just somehow always forgot to when you got home. You'd sit down at your computer and open up a search engine and forget everything you had planned on doing because you saw your excel spreadsheet open and you'd feel guilty about not finishing something.

Tonight would be different though.

Yeah... you'd look up stuff about trolls tonight.

Annuum looked at you over their glasses like somehow they knew what was going on in your head.

If they could hear your thoughts blink twice.

Instead of blinking they went stock still, lips parting in a way that indicated they were tasting the air for something. When they finally moved, it was to whip around almost wildly to face the door, a buzzing growl at the back of their throat as they grabbed a hunting knife from god knows where .

You'd seen Annuum jumpy before, but this.... It was enough to make you r fist curl even tighter around the trowel in your hand.

It all happened so fast you didn't have much time to react.

And before you knew it, the door had swung open to reveal a very familiar figure. Tall, imposing, the door obscured his horns, but that was unmistakably Cronus. "Shit is there more than one greenhouse...?"

He looked Annuum over Once. Twice. And you half expected him to hit on your growling friend or make some sort of placating gesture, but he just flared his fins and let out a sound you could only describe as if somebody tried to turn a maracca into a wind instrument. The kind of wild shit you'd hear in Jurassic Park or something.

Annuum's ears went flat, but then they looked down at his chest then back up at his face and stopped growling. Instead brushing off their Hawaiian shirt like it had dust on it. "You're a long way from the ocean. It is fortuitous, little guppy, that you have found a friend here, isn't it." There was a very thinly veiled threat but their statement was enough for him to turn his eyes away from them for a moment to sweep the room. His (what you could only describe as a) threat display dropped immediately and his face lit up as soon as he spotted you from your place among the plants and fungi .

He breathed out your name and you smiled back at him .

"What are you doing here?"

Wow that s ounded a lot ruder than you'd intended it to , but apparently he didn't mind because he ducked into the building, staying low to avoid hitting anything with his horns . It was a sweet gesture albeit a practical one. "I wanted to see you."

He gave you a grin, a soft clicking (much higher pitch than his purr) coming from his throat. You saw Annuum out of the corner of your eye give you both the driest of looks.

They pulled something out of their pocket and said, "I'm gonna go make love to this mango with my mouth now. I expect this place to not be trashed when I get back."

With that, they left.

You turned your attention back to Cronus, standing up and cupping his cheek. He nuzzled into your hand, and though his eyes were obscured by a pair of sunglasses you were almost positive his pupils would be blown wide. "But how did you find me?"

"I drove." He shrugged, "Then asked around until I found you. I gotta say I do *not* like your jade friend... very rude."

You wanted to say something to defend them but it was pretty rude of them to just start growling at your Cro-... at your *friend* Cronus. "They just uh ... well.... hmm.... "

He placed his hand over yours and pressed a kiss to your palm. "Anyways I got some great fuckin' news and I wanted you to be the first to know and I didn't have your number so... here I am."

Fuck.... You really still hadn't exchanged numbers yet, had you....

He looked you over, smile faltering for just a second as his fins flushed a deep violet. "You look good."

"Flatterer." You looked down, realizing that you were wearing the sweatshirt he had given you. *Oh.*

You could feel your cheeks heating up under his bashful scrutiny. He made a high, clicky, chittery noise and reach ed out to stroke your cheek gently , lifting his sunglasses up to get a look at you but winced in the bright light. "I have no idea how all of ya can stand the daylight. I mean, yeah, the sun ain't gonna roast y ou here but by the fuckin' empress herself , I have no idea how everyone puts up with all this light."

"I'm not sure I can really help you with that, bud." You just gave him a half smile. He pouted at you like you were somehow supposed to lasso the sun out of the sky and give it a stern talking to until it dimmed its light. "So what's this good news of yours ? "

"Right," Cronus grinned , "So, I uhh," He let out a giddy little giggle. "One of my songs is gonna be featured in the next Monstercat Call of the Wild. That's uh, that's the big electronica sort of music collection slash... radio station? I'm pretty sure that's the right human word for it."

"Holy shit! Cronus, that's amazing!" You replied, pulling him into the most bonecrushing hug you could muster. "That's phenomenal news, dude. I'm so proud of you."

He hugged you back, and you felt your feet leave the ground, stomach flipping as he spun you in a circle. You probably should have worried about your samples or knocking into something, but even after he put you back on solid ground you were disoriented. You clung to him for a few more shaky moments.

You couldn't remember the last time someone had picked you up.... Maybe middle school?

And before you could stop it, a little giddy giggle escaped your lips which in turn heated your cheeks up in a way that made you hide your face in his chest for just a moment longer than probably socially acceptable.

When you finally pulled away he was just looking at you with such a familiar, tender, alien expression that made your stomach do a little whirl.

"So, uh... what song are they gonna play?" You asked after a moment.

He froze, smile still plastered on his face, but there was most assuredly panic in his eyes and your heart fell through the floor. *Oh god*.... "Uhhhhh.... Don't worry about it, kitten. I'm sure you wouldn't be into it that much anyways." He mumbled, looking away.

You wanted to say something to the contrary, but you really didn't want him knowing that you'd listened to his song.... You really hoped Phil wouldn't bring it up.

Oh fucking... oh fucking god you hoped Phil wouldn't bring it up.

But you just reached up and patted his face. He leaned into your touch and sighed.

You spent a few minutes more in silence before Annuum returned, wiping off a small knife. They looked at the two of you for a moment, and you stepped away from Cronus. "Well, I'll let you get back to your song writing, Cronus. I'll see you later."

"Y-Yeah." He replied, walking out.

Annuum just sat down in their seat, picking up their tablet. They leaned back in their seat, cataloging some of the info you'd recorded earlier into the device and taking a swig from their water bottle. They worked silently, head bopping along to the music from the speaker.

You just went back to collecting more soil samples, trying to ignore the creeping anxiety in your gut, wishing you knew whether or not you wanted them to make a comment.

They didn't even look at you as they continued their work.

"At least the fish you netted is pretty."

"It's not like that."

"Oh?" They just raised an eyebrow, turning their forest green eyes on you. "Look, dude, I get it's probably not my place to meddle, but your quads are pretty fucked right now."

"There are no quads. It's just me and Phil. Cronus is just a friend." You stabbed the dirt a little harder than necessary with your little trowel.

"You keep saying that, but you're wearing that seadweller's sign right now."

"So? It was a gift. A friendly gift from a friend. Who is my friend. And not my lover because we are friends."

They gave you an incredibly dry look. The kind that you'd give to someone trying to tell you that they couldn't do their lab work because they were taking care of their mother when you knew very well they had just been out partying, and you hated it.

"I don't give out my caste sign to my friends. No one does."

Your cheeks heated up at that, a lot of little bits and pieces falling into place. "Well, this is different. We agreed to just be friends."

"I say this in the most human-like platonic pale way that I can because you obviously can't sort out your quadrants and I don't want or need that in a diamond," They put the tablet down and rested their arms on their knees, "But this doesn't seem sustainable."

"I don't want or need romances with multiple people and even if I did.. . I have a lot to deal with right now and I just can't handle something like that." You put your trowel down more aggressively than you intended and picked up the tray of jars.

"Fine. Maybe you don't have time for quads. That's perfectly fine and I can't fault you for it. I'm not even super into the quad system because it boils down emotional connection with people to a specific classification- but that's that's a talk for another day. I hear the way you talk to and about Phil and it looks like there's not a lot of... *romantic chemistry*. You haven't even told you you love him and that's supposed to be a big human thing for relationships-" They held a hand up as soon as you opened your mouth to interrupt. "You're obviously nowhere near the same page."

You wanted to argue, but they hit a little too close for comfort. You and Phil hadn't been on the same page for a while, but that was okay... you were in the same book.... You didn't have to be on the same exact page all the time....

"I may hate everything highbloods stand for, but even I have to admit, having one in your corner can get you almost anywhere. And I'm about seventy five percent sure that if I hadn't come back in here you two would have started making out or getting sickeningly publicly pale. Although from everything you say I don't think he 's ever had his quads sorted either so who the fuck even really knows ... And y'know what I can't even say I can blame him because romance is weird and way more complicated than the empire ever put out in its sanctioned schoolfeedings. But what I'm trying to say is that it looks like you might want to reorganize your romantic life. Again I want to reiterate this is not a pale solicitation."

You gave an angry huff, but managed to place the jars onto the storage shelf gently. "I appreciate your concern, but I have everything sorted out, thanks."

"Do you though?"

"*Yes*."

Annuum narrowed their eyes, looking you up and down thoughtfully. "It's okay to admit that sometimes-"

"You want to know why?" You finally snapped. "I don't want to be the kind of asshole who breaks up with someone for someone else just because it's more *exciting*! I don't want to be that person who leaves because they're just *bored*! Who leaves just because there's a *spark* they see in someone else! Because that spark *was there once*, and that spark can fade. What I have with Phil is solid and stable and comfortable and that's enough. If I leave him for someone new and shiny... what does that make me?" You let out a breath, the jars on the new tray clinking as you shook. "*That's not the kind of person I want to be*.... Love isn't just about emotions or words. It's about *work* and *dedication* and *trust*. And even if... *even if* I wanted to break up with Phil, I wouldn't want it to be because I had found someone more exciting when we haven't even gotten the chance for *something* physical between us. So *just*...."

They regarded you silently, the reflections from the greenhouse on their glasses only enhancing the green of their irises. "Okay. I'll drop it."

"Thank you," You muttered.

The two of you spent the rest of the day working in silence.

"I'm thinking of moving." Phil said as you both secured the point in your game, later that day.

"Oh?"

"I'm thinking out East." There was an air of nonchalance in his voice tempered by an expectant pause... like you were supposed to know what the hell he meant by that.

Which... you were pretty fucking terrified that you did. East was where you were. East like your apartment. East like... like.... "That's *nice.* Where are you looking? I hear New York City is a... *fun* place to live." Somewhere close enough to visit for a day but far enough to keep things... within acceptable parameters.

"Babe, we've been dating for almost a year now. I was thinking it might be time to take things to the next level... maybe move in together or... *something more*."

You threw a grenade at the enemy team, missing by a country mile, trying to control your breathing because this uh....

This conversation was happening.

And... and it wasn't the idea of moving in with Phil was awful it was just....

It was just too fast.

Yes.

Way too fast.

"Phil," You swallowed, "I don't know what to say." You finally admitted after a very, very uncomfortable pause.

He let out an agitated huff. "Wouldn't that help both of us financially? Having two incomes? You could afford to quit that stupid tutoring job."

"Hey! It's not stupid. I really like that job and it pays well."

"Babe, you know I love you, but it's really frustrating feeling so stagnant all the time. I want to *be* with you."

You were torn.

On one hand you understood the sentiment.

On the other... on the other the thought of taking that step, that *massive* step.... You hadn't even met in person yet for god's sake.

But you would be soon. Just another three weeks, and you hated how terrified it made you feel. But you were also excited because Phil was your friend *and* boyfriend. A real two for one deal.

"I want to be with you too, but don't you think it's just moving too fast?"

"We've been dating for almost a year."

"I know.... It just feels fast, y'know?" You really hoped your voice didn't betray how panicked you felt.

"A lot of couples do it even faster. Though I guess for someone who can't even say 'I love you' after a year would think a snail's fast." His voice belied a hint of resentment (less of a hint more of his entire tone.... But he still loved you. He said he did.... Things were still good between you... right?)

"I'm sorry. I just... English doesn't have those tiers of love built into the language. Yo te quiero, Phil. But 'te amo' is just... hard." Your voice cracked, palms sweaty (arms spaghetti).

He rewarded you with a sigh.

"You make it hard to stay mad at you." Tired, but fond. "I suppose that will have to suffice for now. I am on the same level as your love of guacamole, but I guess I know you care."

You let out a very fake chuckle and a mental sigh of relief.

"I still think I should move out east though. I think it would be good for us."

"Y-yeah..." You mumbled, stomach doing a little whirl that made you want to vomit.
But he loved you and... and this was inevitable either way.

A natural evolution to your relationship.

So why did it make you feel so uneasy ?

Something about Cronus felt different as he pulled you down to his sound studio.

"So, I'm working on a song right now, and I wanted to get your input." He said, throwing a practiced casual grin in your direction, and for you felt your stomach twist itself in knots.

Was he going to have you listen to that song he'd made about you?

What were you supposed to do with your hands if he did that?

What were you going to do?

"Is it the one that's gonna be played on Call of the Wild?"

"Maybe."

You nodded nervously

"No need to look so worried, kitten." He scratched the back of his head self-consciously. "It uh... it ain't about sex."

Oh god it was Quadrant Confusion wasn't it?

But like a good friend you accepted the headphones he offered you, putting them on your head (noting they were much, much too big for you so you had to sort of hold them in place (at least that took care of the hands question).

You immediately noticed the empty bottle of Jack Daniels on his sound desk. Dear God....

You'd always sort of known he had a problem.... Probably. Definitely (given you found him on his birthday wandering on the side of the road drunk out of his mind and half run-over). But, he'd seemed to have gotten better since you two had started hanging out... and if he needed drinks to calm his nerves....

That indigestion feeling was back in full force.

"Sorry, I don't have any smaller ones." Cronus mumbled sheepishly, holding out a hand for you to give them back. "I'll just play it over the audio indu- speakers. You guys call them speakers haha." He sat at the soundboard table and set some things up, giving you a shy smile. "Please be honest even if it's brutal."

As you braced yourself for the worst, you couldn't help but feel nauseous. But when the first few bars began, you didn't recognize them. This was something completely new.

And by god did it fill you with both elation and dread.

It started off slow, but the beat built up steadily culminating into a quick EDM sort of pop song almost. You couldn't help but notice there were no lyrics to it, and you didn't realize you had started bopping to the rhythm until you caught Cronus positively beaming at you. Cheeks flushed, you averted your eyes.

"It's not finished yet." He said as the song began to wind down. "Still have some more things I wanna add but d'you like it, kitten?"

"That's gonna be an unequivocal yes, my dude." You still didn't quite meet his eyes, cheeks still warm. "That is what the kids would call 'a bop'."

"Well if that ain't a cause to celebrate, I dunno what is."

" Indeed a reason to party. " You replied, finally lookin g at him.

Looking back, that was probably your first mistake of the night.

The glass of champagne you accepted was your second.

" Okay, okay, your turn. Fuck, marry, kill, " You pointed at the screen where a cheesy hallmark movie was playing. "That background guy, the main character's best friend, and that barista."

"Can't I fuck 'em all?" Cronus pulled you further into his lap , just barely avoiding your chow mein.

You shook your head, "Nope. You must pick one for each."

" *Must* huh.... Okay, marry the best friend, fuck that background guy, kill the barista."

"Really? The best friend?"

"Yeah, she's nice." He said through a mouthfull of prawn. "I feel like she'd be good wubby material. That background guy is hot and I definitely want him to suck my bulge, but that barista looks like she'd stab me with a fork. Bad vibes. No good. I'd fuck her though."

You snorted, taking another bite of your noodles.

"How about you with those guys?"

"You gotta choose new ones. That's how the game works."

"Fine." He popped a whole crab rangoon into his mouth.

"If you get crumbs in my hair I'm gonna have to kill you." You warned him.

"I'm bein' careful, promise." In his defense, he really had been; leaning away from you each time he took a bite. "I choose that guy, the girl that runs the gift shop, aaaaand me!" He hugged you close and nuzzled your hair like he was the most clever dimwit out there.

"That's easy. Marry the girl from the gift sho p , and fuck that guy." You replied without skipping a beat.

" But that leaves... you'd choose me to... ?" He made a supremely offended noise and you twisted around to give him a shit eating grin. He just looked playfully wounded, "I buy you human Chinese food and give you expensive human champagne, expecting nothing back, and this is how you treat me, kitten?"

You just stuck your tongue out at him and waggled your eyebrows mischievously. Which may well have been the third mistake of the night.

You could have sworn you heard his breath hitch. "Yeah, well, *I* wouldn't kill you. I'd *marry* you. "

You let out a much too high laugh as you replied, " Huge mistake, my dude. Awful. Really poor judgement there."

" I'd marry you , and I'd treat you right, and every single night I'd make you feel so go- "

"Cronus." You cut him off sternly, y our stomach turned itself over in knots, that uncomfortable indigestion feeling making itself known (Because there was a seriousness in his expression that....) "I think we've had enough of this game."

He huffed, but he didn't fight you on it.

"My favorite scene's coming up." He said after a beat , leaning back on the pile and chomping away on some more rangoon.

"You've seen this enough that you have a favorite scene?" You snorted.

"Shut up, it's coming up!"

You just laughed, and he shoved you playfully . Or at least what you assumed was playfully because by human standards that was a bit *excessive* on the force as he practically bowled you over off the pile .

Immediately his hands were on you, soft and cool as he made a high pitch chittering noise , "Sorry, sorry, sorry I didn't mean to do that," He said quickly as he pet your face, your shoulders, your arms. (You were pretty surprised that he didn't try to cop a feel). "Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

"I may be easy to knock over, but I'm not exactly fragile." You batted his hands away.

He blushed profusely.... "Kitten, that's um... I mean I know humans are... shit. I ain't said nothin' bout any wrigglers."

The fuck was he on about?

When you just stared at him he buried his head in his hands, "Kitten, you'll be the fuckin' death of me."

"What are you even talking about?"

"Please just drop it. I don't wanna talk about it." He mumbled into his palms.

You drummed on his leg as you got on your knees and faced him, "C'mon, tell me!" You pestered, prodding at his arms to try and pull them away from his face. "Tell meeeeeee."

"Noooo," He whined, you managed to jostle him a bit and he fell back into the pile.

You climbed on top of him like a little spider monkey, tugging at his hands and laughing, "C'mon. I promise I won't judge you." (Much).

"Kitten, please just let it go." He peeked at you from between his fingers. There was definitely smile in his voice, and you had the awful urge to tickle him. Which you refrained from doing because you were a dignified adult, and for all you knew that could be something overtly sexual.

(But would it really hurt to try it....)

You leaned back against his leg to give him a little room and poked his belly. "You know you can tell me anything right?"

He just shook his head, giggling his little alien giggle. "Nuh-uh. Not fallin for that one."

You poked his stomach and were rewarded with another giggle, but you refrained from poking him more than that. You were supposed to be a dignified adult after all.

Finally he pulled his hands from his face, one palm coming to rest on the outside of your thigh. But he didn't try to grope you or act untoward so you didn't mind. He let out a content breath, staring at you with that same stupid, tender expression.

"Sorry we missed your favorite part." You said with an almost, but not quite, shit eating grin.

"You're my favorite part."

You snorted because that may well have been one of his cheesiest lines yet, and he wrapped you up in his arms and pulled you to his chest.

"I had a lot of fun tonight," Cronus murmured , nuzzling into your hair , enveloping you with his arms .

"Me too," You couldn't help but admit with a contented sigh.

He squeezed your hand, kissing the top of your head. It wasn't the mouth or the cheek so Phil couldn't say shit.... (If you decided to tell him at all.... Things had been... out of sync between the two of you as of late. But it was okay. You were gonna meet up soon and have some actual face to face time and... and everything would work out.... Right?) You leaned back into his touch.

You should probably start heading out soon, you still had some quizzes to grade before tomorrow, but you were so comfortable. A lot more comfortable than you'd once ever thought you could be around this shuckboy menace.... But sitting here in this pile of pillows and blankets (that you couldn't help but notice had mushroom prints) you were as snug as a bug in a rug.

"I got you a something."

"Cronus," You sighed. "I-"

"It's small don't worry," He quickly interrupted you. You rolled your eyes so hard you were positive that he could feel it through your skull. "C'mon, chief."

You shrugged in defeat and he let out a little noise of triumph that mostly sounded like a goddamn cicada but like 50% deeper. It was endearing and cute and you hated the way your heart did a funny little flip in response.
You hated that it did that a lot....

He kissed the top of your head again and murmured out, "Close your eyes. No peeking."

You obeyed him half expecting it to be raunchy music or his bulge as he shifted around a bit, pulling something out of his pocket. Okay so not his bulge... which was relieving. It really did seem pretty small.

The gift.... not his bulge.

Not that you would know if his bulge was big.

Or that you wondered if it was big.

Or if it was proportional to his body size.

Nope.

Fuck this train of thought.

(More like fuck h-)

You bit the inside of your cheek to distract you.

Because this... this was just excitement from having someone new in your life.

He took your hand, gently spreading your fingers with his cool digits. You could feel the stretchy webbing between his thumb and pointer. And then you felt something cold and thin

being slid onto your ring finger... and it felt like the floor had dropped out from beneath your stomach.

Because this wasn't....

This....

It was....

This wasn't happening.

Nope.

Nope.

Nope.

Nope.

Nope.

"Okay you can open your eyes now." He whispered in your ear, planting a soft kiss on the shell.

Your intestines twisted themselves into knots, bile threatening the edge of your esophagus. You shook your head.

"C'mon, kitten, you ain't gotta be shy 'round me."

There was no way he knew the significance of rings or their placement on fingers and this was... Okay so maybe he knew about rings but he couldn't like *know know* about rings... Yeah he especially couldn't have any idea about the left hand being significant... this was probably just a platonic troll thing and maybe... maybe it was a ringpop! Yeah! You hadn't had one of those in years.

So despite the mounting panic you managed to crack open your eyelids.

That... So that definitely wasn't a ring pop.

You desperately tried to control your breathing because if you didn't you were pretty sure you would have started hyperventilating.

Because that was most assuredly not a ring pop by any stretch of the imagination.

A delicate gold band wrapped around your finger to cradle a large clear, stylistically diamond cut pink gem with the Ampora's violet crest encased within it. Flanking it on either side were two smaller gems of the same cut while small pale violet stones glittered in the light, surrounding them on all sides. As you looked closer, you noticed that each of the small violet gems were set in gold and silver flowers.

"Do you like it?" He asked, a nervous edge to his voice and you found the will to tear your eyes away from the gaudy display of opulence on your finger to his own hand he'd stretched out in front of you , a similar ring adorning his finger . "I got us matching ones, but I wasn't really sure what your sign was so I just had them cut a mushroom since you like them so much. It uh... it even matches that tie you had on. "

The ring finger of his left hand.... Fuck, with all the hallmark movies he'd watched at this point there was no way he didn't know the significance.

You- you couldn't breathe. No wait, yes you could. Fuck , you couldn't stop the rapid rise and falls of your chest, sucking air down like it was going out of style.

"I can't accept this."

"What do you mean you can't accept it?" There was an edge to his voice that you couldn't place. "It's a gift you can't just not accept it."

You took the ring off noting how perfectly it fit which just made you want to bolt even more. You got up, trying to thrust it back into his hand but he pulled back, hands up at his side. "I can't take this."

You knew there was no way he wasn't picking up on the panic in your voice, and- and you couldn't meet his eyes.

"Well I'm not taking it back." He replied, getting up and putting the ring back onto your finger . "Kitten, we ain't gotta fight about this. Just... take the stupid fucking ring."

"No!" You spat out , finally looking at him properly, eyes wide. "Cronus! What the actual fuck?! we aren't - this isn't. Rings are a big deal for humans and I can't... accept this. It's- i t's inappropriate! This isn't okay! "

And something in him snapped.

"Cod, you're *infuriating,* you know that? One minute you're all interested, getting pale and piling like we're officially quadranted but the next you flop over like a wet snuggle plane and act like you don't want this shit!" The sclera of his eyes were a deep orange instead of their usual eggy yellow, "You *twist* and you *play* with people's emotions like no one else fuckin' matters!" He snarled, lips curled down over his teeth in a sneer. "You're absolutely fucking maddening, you frigid, two-faced slitherbeast of a huma-"

He froze, face falling in mortification.

It felt as though the wind had been knocked out of you in one fell swoop. You took a step back, and like some big dumb emotional stupid idiot you could feel your lower lip betray you with an uncontrollable tremble.

"I didn't mean that."

Cronus' voice was barely louder than a whisper. You opened your mouth uselessly because you knew if you tried to make a sound that you'd start crying and you'd already made enough

of an ass of yourself for one day.

You needed... you needed to get out of there.

You took another step back, then another, and before you knew it you were at the door.

"Please, I'm sorry. " He breathed out. "I didn't mean that."

His voice was so distant you could barely hear it over the blood pounding in your ears . You turned on you heel, hurrying out of there because you could already feel your eyes getting wet. You didn't run, you savored that small dignity, but goddamn did you power walk out of there like a middle aged health nut. Any aerobics instructor would have wept tears of the purest joy had they seen your exquisite stride. You could hear Cronus behind you, calling out your name, saying more about how he didn't mean it, to come back because this was all just one big mistake.

He was definitely right about that. This entire situation was a mistake . (He didn't mean it....)

You should never have gotten... involved with him. You should have just- You should have *just-*

His cold fingers (cold like the rest of him) wrapped around your shoulder but you shrugged him off , wrenching the front door open and slamming it shut behind you before he got the chance to step out.

You were down the steps before you heard the door open and him call your name again, but you just sped up and got to your car in no time flat, p ulling out of their driveway they same calm, controlled way that you always had because driving recklessly was not something you were about to start doing .

However the moment you pulled into the parking lot for your building you couldn't help the tears as they started falling, never letting up your white knuckled grip on your steering wheel. You weren't sure how long you sat in your car like that, weeping uncontrollably like a little kid who just found out that Santa Claus isn't real and never will be. It was a pathetic display but....

You sighed, sniffling and wiping your eyes after a long while.

You reached out to get a napkin to blow your nose from the glove compartment when you realized you still had the ring on your finger. Sitting there like some sort of ostentatious reminder that Cronus was a presumptuous bastard who was richer than sin.

God... you would have started crying even more if you hadn't been so exhausted by your first bout. And catching in the light, it really was an exquisite piece of jewelry. Far too nice for someone like you.... Where would you even wear it to? It wasn't like you attended extravagant evening parties, and you were almost guaranteed to get mugged if anyone saw you wearing it around here.

How much was this thing even worth?

How much could you sell it for?

(You couldn't do that to him....) But why the hell not? Obviously he only wanted you romantically even though he *knew* you couldn't give him that. *You* were infuriating?

No! (Well maybe a little but) *He* was the one who was infuriating!

You thought about how your rent was due at the end of next week... and how this... this was made of gold and gems and you could probably get a really pretty penny for it.

Yeah. Fuck that guy.

You took it off and stuffed it into your pocket after wrapping it up in a non-snotty napkin and headed back inside.

You were afraid to leave the ring at home when you left your apartment the next day. You didn't live in the best of neighborhoods. It wasn't the most violent place, and you'd never been mugged, but it was still not the greatest place to live....

And the thought of being able to sell the ring and maybe even be able to move someplace else.... But you couldn't do that to Cronus. (No, that was stupid you absolutely could. He'd sell your soul to satan if it meant he could fuck you ... probably....)

You sighed. He wouldn't do that to you. He was a fuckboy but he wasn't that much of a fuckboy and he was getting be-

No. You weren't going to think about this. You weren't going to think about him, you were going to get that thing appraised and maybe talk to Annuum and get their opinion because you respected them. And they understood troll culture better than you did and maybe... maybe-

When you opened the door to your joint office, they were sitting at their desk trying to balance a pencil on their nose. They raised an eyebrow when they caught your eye, putting the pencil behind their ear instead. "What's with the face?"

You sighed again, flopping down in your chair. "Cronus got me a ring and tried to make things between us romantic."

"Oof." Annuum winced. "That's rough."

You shrugged, slumping over. "I just... He *knows* I'm with Phil. He *knows* I'm not gonna cheat on Phil."

They just gave you a look of overwhelming pity like you were a sad little porpoise stuck swimming in circles in a tiny little pool, forced to do tricks as your only enrichment for the rest of your miserable, unnaturally truncated life. (Which given your living arrangements and

the crippling weight of living in a late-stage capitalist society such an analogy was more apt than you'd really care to admit....)

"And then I freaked out..." You burried your face in your hands, reliving the awful way he'd looked at you. "And he got mad , and I don't know if we can be friends."

They gave you a sympathetic nod. "That sucks, dude."

When you trusted yourself enough to speak you pulled out the ring and showed them. It was just as gaudy *and* beautiful as ever and they let out a low whistle.

"Holy mother of fuck." Annuum looked at it appreciatively. "Yeah he definitely went all out. You gonna sell that thing?" They echoed your thoughts.

"I wanna get it appraised before I do that." You said after a moment.

"You're gonna want to go through an Alternian jeweler. No way is a human going to know what that shit's *actually* worth. You may need to sell it on the black market honestly...." They took off their glasses and brought it closer to their eyes, squinting as they examined it. "Yeah, buying this kind of stuff is likely to get the buyer and seller culled if someone high enough caught wind. But I'm sure there's gotta be a market for it. I'll reach out to my contact for you."

Annuum gave you a smile that you were sure was meant to be reassuring but you were just left with the question of *how in the world did they have a black market contact?*

You wrapped it back up in a tissue and put it back in your pocket.

Soon... soon you'd have a better idea of what to do.

You made the mistake of checking your phone at work, muting your chat app again after seeing you'd gotten fifty new messages. Probably all apologies... god you couldn't fucking deal with him right now. You had important shit to do and that ring was burning a hole through your pocket.

Something on your news app caught your eye though ; "Elon Musk Missing after Meeting with Alien Rhyme Juggler Mogul." So that's why everyone kept talking about that ostentaceous, malevolent parasite masquerading as a person today.

The header was complete with a picture of a troll clown covered in vibrant multicolored paint.

....

....No wait you were pretty sure that was blood.

Yeah that was definitely blood.

Good. You hoped that (you scrolled down and read the troll's name) Rapsta Slamzy did what you had always wanted to do to that man: Hunt him for sport.

He even had the teeth for it. Look at those chompers. Could probably just rip someone's throat out with one bite with those things.

Good for him. You hoped he had diplomatic immunity. You hoped he ate Elon Musk so that all that remained of him was a pile of shit. You hoped he'd eat Jeff Bezos too.

"Hey," Annuum plopped down beside you and handed you a paper coffee cup with a slice of pie in it , a sly grin on their face . You gratefully took it and started pouring it into your mouth without a fork because goddamn ' s just one of those days innit. "So I got into contact with a friend. They can meet up tomorrow but it has to be discrete. I offered up my house because I can't imagine your highblood going haywire and killing everyone involved. Seems more of the 'mope and cry' type. "

You really couldn't think of anything to say to the contrary. Cronus Ampora was very much a mope and cry type of person. But knowing that there was such a stark Troll social significance to the ring tucked in your pocket made you feel a little weird about going through with this.

But... you were just getting it appraised. You didn't have to commit to selling anything at this point.

You didn't sleep well that night.

There was a sleek black car parked in Annuum's driveway when you arrived the next day, and when you opened the door you saw a slender troll robed in a loose black dress sitting in Annuum's armchair. Their sharp blue eyes watched you like a hawk watched a mouse, both having far, far more pupils than an eye was supposed to.

They flashed you a fang filled smile and every bone in your body screamed at you to run.

Annuum had run to get you both a drink, and in the silence you couldn't help but stand there awkwardly because which pupil were you supposed to meet? How were you supposed to greet them? And when Annuum returned you took the tea gratefully.

They gestured to the troll in the seat. "This is my associate, the one I was telling you about. She's one of the best in the business." They gave you a smile that you were pretty sure was meant to be soothing. "She can find a buyer for just about anything."

"Well I'm not... I'm not necessarily looking to sell it. I mostly just want to get it evaluated." You interjected.

"Don't worry, little thing, I simply want to see what your friend dragged me to this backwater planet for." She said in a very thick accent that reminded you a lot of French , giving you a predatory grin. "You may call me The Procurer."

Hesitantly you took the ring out of your pocket, opening the felt bag you had put it in for safe keeping.

"How very curious." Immediately she leaned in, all pupils honing in on it. "Oh my, that is quite the diamond."

She looked up at you, giving you a mischievous grin. "Little thing, who did you steal this from?"

"I didn't."

"It's true. That Seadweller is smitten. You should have seen them both together... it's ridiculously sappy." Annuum replied, plopping down on the couch.

You weren't sure whether or not you should be offended.

The Procurer just laughed, shrill and alien and it sent a shiver down your spine. "A highblood, the Orphaner's descendant no less, and a human. How bizarre, don't you think? And you're pawning the gifts he gives you."

You pursed your lips, unsure of how to rebuttal.

"Hey, lay off my buddy." Annuum said, "They may be weird together, but who gives a shit?"

"The Empire," The Procurer replied with a smirk. "You know how they feel about pailfellows. Though I suppose as long as it doesn't contaminate the slurry, then a highblood could get away with having a little pet with only a few disgusted looks." She gave you a once over. "No offense intended."

You fidgeted, drumming your fingers against your ar ms. You weren't sure if you liked this troll. Everything about her struck a wrong chord with you.

You... you were more than a pet to Cronus... weren't you? He- he cared about you (people care about their pets). He took time for you and bought you jewelry and clothes and... and that described most pet owners with their cats. Is that why he kept giving you those pet names and calling you kitten?

"Give it here, I need a closer look." She held out her hand expectantly, each of her claws manicured to a wicked point.

You felt your stomach do a sickening flip as the ring left your fingers... it felt *wrong*.

(He *had* apologized profusely... he did seem genuinely repentant).

Cronus was just sorry about the consequences, not about the words or the actions or0

He was your *friend* though.

(Maybe even your best friend at this point).

He cared about you enough to get you customized matching rings, and you'd just freaked out and he'd freaked out and-

And that still didn't change the fact that he'd said some really rude shit and that the gift was inappropriate at best.

And all that shuckboy really wanted to do-

"This is exquisite craftsmanship." The Procurer hummed, all pupils focused on the ring as she took out a pair of glasses with multiple lenses. "This diamond's color and size are stunning. A bit subtle for a highblood, but it is the perfect pink for a moirail. If I'm not mistaken, which I never am, the caste sign and the studs are made of violet sapphire. That filagree is platinum...." She let out a low whistle. "I can most assuredly find you a buyer for this."

She gave you a smile that was altogether quite unsettling as she said, "I'm thinking we could get four, maybe even five."

"Four or five what?" You asked, your cup of tea still untouched.

"Million caegers."

You were going to hurl.

"Of course we'd need to set up a private auction, invite only. We may be able to get even more if we could find a clown who is interested." She gave you an appraising look, "We could be looking at close to twenty if you were part of the package. That would be a good deal, no?" You looked over to Annuum for help.

"I think you've given us enough to think about for now." They intervened.

"Oh, Rene-, sorry, *Greeneye* is what you go by nowadays. Not very original for a title, but who am I to judge?" She turned her eyes onto them. "But I suppose you are right. I will let your little human think for now." She placed the ring back in your hand and pinched your cheek. A look of wonder coming over her face as she turned to Annuum again. "Such soft skin! You never told me humans had such soft skin! It's like a squishy little grub! Tell me, sweet thing, is all of your skin so soft?"

You took a step back.

"No need to look so tense. I am not going to flay you, human. Though I suppose such a question could be construed as some form of solicitation in your alien culture." The Procurer tipped your chin up, inspecting you like a showpig before releasing you and handing you a black business card. "When you want to sell, you know where to find me."

And with that she left.

It took every shred of self restraint and dignity you had to not to have a panic attack in Annuum's home.

You were holding something worth millions and... and that was just a fucking... gift that he gave to you. You could sell this and buy a home with land and live comfortably probably for a good portion of your life.... And it was sitting in your hands. You *wore* it.

You had to horrible urge to put it on again.

"Sorry about her," Annuum said after coming back from seeing The Procurer out the door, "She's good at what she does, and she's not about to lose clients and straight up murder people who try to use her services, but I know she's far from pleasant to deal with. I should have warned you about that. Are you okay though? That was a lot to take in."

You nodded, wrapping the ring back up and gingerly tucking it into your pocket. "Yeah, I'm fine. I just... need time to process everything. That's... a *lot* of money." You admitted.

A lot of money, and Cronus had had two made. A matching set. That was....

He'd be heartbroken if he ever found out....

So?

He was your friend... even if he was a massive jerk and you kind of wanted nothing more to do with him.

"I just need time."

You didn't tell Phil.

Cronus was waiting for you on the steps when you arrived, looking just as awful as you felt. There were deep, deep bags under his eyes, his hair was a mess, and his fins drooped like wilting leaves.

The thought of talking to him filled your stomach with bile and a forboding feeling of dread. But you were a professional, and you had a job to do. So you steeled yourself and got out of the car. He looked up at you with such desperation that you couldn't help but feel pity well up in your gut.

Because he was pitiful.

A sad, pitiful little man.

"Can we talk?" He asked, voice hoarse.

"I don't want to talk to you." You replied cooly. Because you didn't. His words still stung.

You tried to walk past him, but he gently took your hand.

"Then you ain't gotta talk.... But please, just listen."

You hated that your feet held fast to their spot on the ground like a pair of traitorous magnets. You looked away and muttered out, "Fine."

"I'm sorry. I reacted poorly to your rejection. I had hyped up an idea of us in my head, and when it turned out not to be true, I freaked out. I was very, very hurt, and I wanted to make you hurt too. Which was wrong. Because..." He knelt down on the fieldstone path, back bending until he was prostrate before you. "Because you're my best friend in the entire cosmos. And even without sex or romance off the table, I- I ain't ever cared about anyone this much before. Knowing I hurt you, that I *wanted* to hurt you, makes me sick to my stomach. I can't eat. I can't sleep.... I'm sorry."

"Did your therapist help you write this?" You asked. It was a low blow, and you winced when you heard it come from your own voice.

He just nodded, "She helped me articulate some of it. I didn't want to fuck this apology up like I fuck everything else up."

There was an uncomfortable pang in the pit of your stomach. No one had ever really groveled in front of you before, let alone seek actual professional help on how best to apologize. "I accept your apology." You said without even thinking. "I... also didn't react well to your ring. I'm sorry about that. I panicked."

He sniffled a little, straightening up and looking at you with his big, shiny, egg yolk eyes. He blinked a few times before resting his forehaed against your stomach. "You mean it?" He mumbled into your shirt.

"Yeah, I do." Then you sighed, resting a hand on his head. "Look, I'd like to give you the ring back. I know you'll find someone it'll be perfect on."

He shook his head. "It was a gift. You ain't gotta wear it or anything... but I can't take it back."

"Cronus...."

"No take-backsies with gifts. I t's yours, you can do whatever you want with it."

The thought of selling it came back to haunt you, but you pushed that away because... because you'd fallen down a very slippery slope and found that he was probably your best

friend in the whole cosmos too.

Your shirt was starting to become damp with his tears, and you combed your fingers through his tangled hair.

He was your best friend too.

Of Carousels and Death Knells

Chapter Summary

Commitment is a terrifying thing

Chapter Notes

HAPPY NEW YEAR EVERYONE!

Sorry this took so long... life has been hectic this past month and a half

I want to shout out to everyone making fanart and translating and sending me asks and leaving comments know that each one of them means so much to me! We're getting so close to the end now.... it's hard to believe this bad boy is over 80k words now haha

Darker.... Darker.... Yet darker still... only increasing as you continued down the long corridor; Endless, cavernous ceilings with walls closing tightly around you, countless doors on either side.

Sometimes you could hear voices speaking behind them... laughing, crying, howling in anguish. But still you pressed on, unease writhing in your gut like a den of snakes.

They got louder the further you went... some of them familiar, others less so. It did nothing to assuage the rising panic in you because it got to be a deafening cacophony by the time you finally (*finally*) reached the end of the hallway. The door loomed before you like an unwelcoming obelisk , towering further than you could see in the darkness. The knob was so high up you had to reach for it.

The door creaked open.

B lessed silence.

You were greeted by the smell of pot, dank and potent. In the dim light you could see Annuum, relaxing on a bean bag chair, taking a deep hit from a bong. They exhaled through their nose with a cough and a laugh, passing it to the troll beside them.

Cronus took it was a giggle and breathed deep those same fumes.

"Look who showed up," Annuum drawled, trying to contain a fit of coughing. "About time."

Cronus didn't say anything, just stared at you, eyes smoldering coals.

Annuum took the rig back and held it out to you, gesturing for you to take a seat.

You plopped down on another conveniently placed beanbag, but declined the hit. They shrugged, taking another one for themself. There was an awkward silence in the room as the bubbling of the bong water permeated the air. They breathed out another cloud of steam. Their eyes were lazy as they turned to look at you. "I don't get it ." They said simply after a moment, voice husky.

"Don't get what?" You replied, very aware of the intensity of Cronus' gaze.

"Why you're like this." He sneered.

Annuum just nodded placidly.

You swallowed, stomach falling. "You'll have to be more specific."

"Glub damn, kitten, you're cute but you're infuriatin'. I don't know how the ever living shit Phil puts up with you." He spat, voice cold as ice and twice as sharp.

You waited for him to continue, but he just took another hit before speaking again. "I don't know how he does it."

Your jaw worked uselessly for a moment, stammering out a soft. "H-he loves me and *I*- "

"Don't love him." Annuum said, those piercing green eyes locking with yours. "Do you."

It wasn't a question.

Your legs shook as you stood. "I-"

"You're pathetic, you know that?" Cronus finally continued. "It's a wonder Phil ain't sick of you, you can't commit to anything! He puts up with so much of your shit it ain't even funny. What's got you so broken you can't even tell your own boyfriend you love him?"

You looked to Annuum for help, but all they did was stare at you as though they were dissecting you with their mind, trying to study like some specimen in a lab. "What are you so afraid of?"

"I'm not afra-"

"That no one will love you once they find out what a mess you are?" Cronus hissed.

You swallowed, frozen in place.

" Afraid for things to continue as they are but afraid of it all coming to an end." Their voice was smooth and monotone, t heir expression nothing short of serious; The same expression they gave you when they'd told you to never contact the Procurer directly, to always use them as an intermediary for your own safety. "Don't you know that everything has an expiration

date? From the smallest grub to the tallest mountain, all things must end. The sun, the moon, and all of the stars in the sky will eventually collapse and give rise to new events, new possibilities. To cut something that is weak and dying out is not shameful, just as there is no shame in dying."

You bolted.

Running down that dark hallway but it twisted and turned until the floor began to give out beneath your feet and you began to tumble down into the abyss below.

You woke with a start, breathing heavy, eyes wet. Your insides writhed around like so many snakes and it took everything in you not to jump out of your stupid little twin sized bed and run to the bathroom and cry.

It wasn't real.

But didn't it have implicat-

They would never treat you like that.

(It wasn't really about them, was it?)

You took a deep breath and looked at your phone. Three in the morning....

You tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable again, but you couldn't get back to sleep.

You tried your best to not think of them any differently as you went through your day, tired as fuck , but you still found it hard to meet Annuum's deep green eyes. If they noticed, they didn't say anything. And when Phil called you, you got so nervous you accidentally hung up on him without saying anything.

You'd resolved to make it up to him later, but that dream... that *stupid* fucking dream just had to haunt your every waking moment even as you tried to will it away.

"Could you hand me those shears?" You practically jumped as Annuum asked you, but you were afraid to turn around and look them in the eyes. "Woah, seems like someone's a little on edge. You know what usually helps me when I'm feeling stressed?"

"Sorry, I'm not really in the mood for weed." You replied hastily.

They snorted, a low chuckle following on its coattails. "I was going to say tea, you dingus."

You could feel your face heating up profusely and you turned around to face them. "Sorry."

"You good? You need a minute?" Their smile was easy, sympathetic even.

You gave a tight lipped smile and nodded. "I'm good. I'm good. I just uh... didn't sleep well."

"Sorry to hear that." They patted your shoulder sympathetically. "Something on your pan?"

Pan meant head in troll lingo. "No, I'm fine. Just some... unpleasant dreams."

"You wanna talk about it?"

"Not really." You said after a few seconds. Of course you wanted to talk about it. Just... maybe not with one of the people you'd had the dream about. In fact the thought of actually discussing it with Annuum made you nauseous.

They'd probably give you an uncomfortably piercing look before saying something poignant and snide that made you feel entirely too exposed. You didn't like that thought.

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm positive." Came your firmer than expected response.

They just shrugged and gave you your space without a word more.

Did you feel bad? Absolutely.

Were you going to do anything about it? No.

Because this was none of their business.

You'd make it up to them the next time you saw them though. Maybe make them some cookies or something. They deserved nice things. Deserved better friends than you at least.

Things felt strange between you two as you continued to work in silence for the rest of the day, passing little more than a few sentences. But when quitting time came, they still gave you their lazy smile and said, "Here's to hoping you sleep a little better tonight."

A ping on your computer jolted you from you awake just in time to see about five pages full of just the letter 'F'. Blearily, you e rased them and checked out the time; only five thirty and you were already dozing off... pathetic.

You took a look at the notification: A message from Cronus. Actually, make that several.

CA: Guess vwho got himself a date for tonight

CA: It was me. I did.

CA: 8ecause I am the most beatiful, sensational, vwonderful, charismatic

CA: Sumptuous , humble, sensual, and studly indivwidual out there

CA: Kitten c'mon I need you to respond

CA: Don't ignore me! I see you're online!

You blinked.

Well, it wouldn't be the first date he'd been on. It probably wouldn't be his last at this point . In fact, it wasn't out of the realm of possibilities that this could blossom into a beautiful and fruitful relationship. You really shouldn't have been surprised.

RR: Sorry, was getting some work done , and awesome! What are you going to wear?

CA: Vwell vwhat do you think I should wear Kitten?

RR: Hmmm...

RR: That silk shirt you wore on your last date was nice. Maybe you should wear that

CA: And vwear the same thing to a date twvice?

CA: Kitten you're killin' me. Seriously, v what kind of social faux pas are you tryin'a make me commit?

RR: I've done it before

CA: Yikes

RR: I don't see what the big deal is

CA: Double Yikes.

CA: Sextouple Yikes.

CA: Kitten that's so trashy lol

RR: Shut up Cronus.

RR: Wear whatever you want to wear then, doesn't matter to me

You took a breath and leaned back, very much awake now.

RR: So what's the ir name?

CA: Blue

CA: Classy right?

RR: Sure

You replied, but in all honesty all you could think of was Gary Oak from Pokemon.

RR: Where are you two going to?

CA: Some ritzy place in the city

CA: Limoncello 's

CA: That's Blue's fav w orite place apparently.

RR: Wow I've heard of that place before

RR: Someone's trying to speedrun getting laid

CA: Glub I hope so

CA: Hell know v s you shouldn't keep a ferrari like this in the garage

For a moment you had to wonder if he was being literal or metaphorical... or a combination of the two.

RR: Cro

RR: I say this with all of the affection in the world

CA: Affection, eh? ;)

RR: I was going to say 'whatever you do, don't be yourself' but i'm a nice friend

RR: Be yourself, and if they can't handle that then they're not worth it

CA: Awvwvwvwv my little Kitten's gone all soft on me

RR: Shut up I regret being nice already

RR: But anyways have fun on your date

CA: You mind coming with me to hype me up?

RR: Cute.

CA: That a yes?

RR: No, it's a no

RR: But you're cute and I think that if they don't see at least a little bit of that then they're stupid

You realized what you'd said after you'd hit send, and you panicked.

RR: Anyways good luck and good night I have shit I need to get done. Bye!

With that you slammed your laptop shut. Letting out a breath you hadn't even realized you were keeping in, you slumped over and rubbed your burning cheeks between the palms of your hands.

Cronus Ampora was going to be the death of you, wasn't he.....

"So how'd you meet?" You asked Cronus as he played Skyrim, leaning back against the side of the couch.

"Well, I went to a party-"

"You have a social life outside of me?" You said, playfully offended, placing a hand over your heart. (Though in all honesty hearing that he'd started hanging out with other people was... surprising.... Though you supposed that he'd changed a lot....)

He flashed you a smile, toothy and entrancing. "Kitten, you know this hot rod's gotta cruise."

That was enough to elicit a snort from you.

"Anyways I was doing shots off their body, and then we started talking," He continued. "They're real smart like you."

"They can't be that smart if they said yes to a date with you." You stuck your tongue out at him.

"Don't make me bite you, kitten." He made an exaggerated chomp showing off his wicked teeth. "I'll do it."

(You'd let him).

"I'm warning you, I bite back."

Cronus turned to waggle his eyebrows at you. "Kinky."

You shoved him with your foot.

"Rude!" He laughed.

"Finish your story!"

"Where was I... oh yeah, I was licking the salt off o' them and they kept talking about some nerdy shit and I asked them if they wanted to go on a date and they said yeah." He licked his lips, eyes flicking between you and the screen.

"Wow, exciting."

"We also made out in a closet." He waggled his eyebrows again, turning to look at you again with a roguish grin, and something in the pit of your stomach sort of sank... just a bit.... Probably because it had been a while since you'd enjoyed life's carnal pleasures. But you were fine. You and Phil were going to meet up, and you'd get some romance in.

"Gross." You teased, wondering if they'd fu-

No.... No.

You weren't going to go down that road.

His face fell a bit (or were you just projecting like a big dumb baby).

"Not that you're gross or anything. Or the idea of someone wanting to, uh... yeah. You definitely aren't gross. I was just teasing." Each word tumbled out of your mouth more

pathetic and floundering than th e ones preceding it .

"Ooo teasing because you're jealous, kitten?" He watched you from the corner of his eggy eyes.

"You wish!"

He stuck his tongue out at you. "Says you. I got a hot date with them tomorrow too."

"Look at you, stud." You laughed, trying to ignore that uncomfortable leaden feeling in your stomach.

Cronus made a choking sound in the back of his throat, jaw slack, face very, very flushed. His pupils were blown wide, the violet of his irises just a thin rim separating the inky black from the yellow of his sclera. He blinked a few times, fins fluttering, a deep clicking noise coming from his chest. "Kitten, don't say things you don't mean."

"What are you on about now?" You asked. Probably something perverted. Almost always something perverted... you wish you could care more about that.

Your alien just cleared his throat and shook his head, waving it off dejectedly. "Don't worry about it. Was just me bein' stupid again."

You bit your tongue because, well... he was your pathetic little shuckboy and of course he was an idiot, but you weren't about to go saying those things out loud. So instead you just grabbed his horn and wiggled his head around so he knew you were being playful. "I'll let it slide this time."

He stared at you with those eyes that were more pupil than iris and let you.

And there was a little piece of you that imagined what he would taste like if you kissed him right now. Pulled him in by his horns and kissed him breathless.

But you stopped yourself from leaning forward slowly and instead headbutted him. Which... in hindsight wasn't your best idea because it definitely hurt you a lot more than it did him, but he started laughing.

And just like that laughter started bubbling from between your own lips as well as you let him go and slumped over to rub at your tender head.

"Cod you're so fuckin weird." He said between giggles , and you nodded , throwing him a coy smile .

Not for the first time... you realized there was no place you would rather be.

"So I was looking into jobs by you. Do you know if Junebug Cafe is any good to their workers?"

You did your best to suppress the internal screaming that rang throughout your mind. Because no, this was... this was probably a good thing. (Right?)

"I think living together will be really beneficial to our relationship. I want to be with you, not just talk about it. I can't wait to see you... only ten more days." Phil absolutely purred.

Yup, yup, yup only ten more days until you guys would meet up. You were going to an amusement park and stay at a motel together.... you were gonna share a bed and your heart was already racing... in a good way (aside from the panic of course... and the nausea... but that was normal to feel, right? Who hadn't felt that way about sleeping in the same bed as someone else... (Boyfriend. He was your boyfriend, not just 'someone else')).

"Phil, I am very excited for our vacation, but I think it would be a good idea to wait until after to discuss living together." You said slowly, carefully.

"Why? I already know how I feel about you. Why bother waiting around?" Phil replied with a huff. "I'm tired of taking things so slow. Don't you want to be with me?"

"Of course," You said, hoping the panic you were feeling wasn't evident in your tone.

"Good. I can't wait to see you though. Just like Christmas morning, I'm gonna enjoy unwrapping this present." The innuendo hit like a mac truck. "Listen I have to go eat dinner now, but I am *beyond* excited. I love you."

"Yeah...."

He ended the call with a loud kissy noise.

You took a minute to catch your breath.

Only ten days. Ten days and you would meet your boyfriend face to face.

You spun around in your chair before burying your face in your hands.

God... why were you feeling such cold feet? You'd known him for years, you'd been dating for almost a year now. You shouldn't feel this nervous. You hated that you felt nervous. But it was okay. It was normal.

(Was it though?)

Yes.

Very normal.

After all, people always got wedding jitters and that was something that most people described as the happiest moment of their lives. So you were fine.

Everything was fine.

You looked at your computer screen; Normally you'd be playing games with Cronus by now. But he was on another date with that same person, Blue . This would make their third... social convention dictated he'd probably be getting lucky tonight.

He seemed to like them a lot, and it seemed that they liked him quite a bit too.

It was nice.

You were happy for him.

(Sad for you... you could really use a distraction right now and Annuum was probably busy. They seemed like the sort of person who kept busy.)

You wondered how his date was going... where they'd gone, if they'd be going back to Blue 's place or Cronus' afterward. If Blue would be there in the morning... (you already knew Cronus would).

No, that was inappropriate to think about, But you hoped they were treating him right. He'd come a long way since you'd first met him and he... he was still rich trash who actively chose to live in New fucking Jersey, but he... wasn't bad. And you... you cared about him a lot more than you'd care to really admit.

You wanted good things for him.

You hoped he was having a better time than you.

Hopping on over to your bed and flopping down, you used the sweatshirt he'd given you as a makeshift blanket, letting out a groan.

It didn't smell like him anymore (not that you minded that), but by every celestial body in the universe did you miss your-

No... *that* stupid shuckboy. Ever since Blue had come into his life, things had been *different*. All he ever really wanted to do was talk about them and how much they reminded him of you, and all of those weird phrases that made your intestines tie themselves in knots.

Probably for the better though. And while you still did cuddle when you hung out, it was a lot less frequently than it had been before, and like a touch starved idiot you wanted to cry because you *missed* it.

You missed him.

You just....

You just....

Buried your face in your pillow.

"I think you'd really like them." Cronus said as he pulled out a switch and put on Skyrim. It had become almost a routine now. You, working on your papers while Cronus played games... just existing in the same place. "They're really smart, just like you."

You mulled through a few lab reports as you watched him play. It was nice. Almost as nice as cuddling and watching shitty movies. (That's probably what he and Blue did together now. Not that it mattered, of course. Hallmark movies were bad anyways.)

(*But it had been your thing*).

"That's nice. I'd like to meet them someday." Yes. Lying was fun and good actually because he was practically beaming, and you liked seeing him genuinely happy. "Maybe even sometime soon."

"I'd like that. I told them all about you. We should do a group hangout and go to uh... brunch? Together. They said they really like brunch, and I'd like to try it out."

"I'm pretty busy." You replied quickly (maybe even a bit sharply, but he didn't seem to notice). But he gave you those big puppy dogfish eyes and you.... "I'll see if I can clear some time."

You really were just a massive pushover for him anymore. And maybe... maybe when Phil finally (and hopefully not anytime soon) moved out here you could all go on double dates together, and you could show him that you and Cronus really were just friends....

Because you weren't.

And double dates together could be fun (or the worst things in the world).

He died to a trap, "This is some bullshit," Cronus whined, loading his last save. "I'd really like that, Kitten. Does sometime this weekend sound good to you? Weekend brunch is a big deal, right? Sunday maybe?"

"Cool," You swallowed. "Cool, cool, cool. Sounds fun."

The words on the paper in your hands were just a little bit fuzzy, not quite in focus because all you could think of was the fact that this weekend wouldn't work for you.

"So...." You said after a while of just staring ineffectually at the lab reports and just *willing* them to finish grading themselves. "I actually can't do this weekend. I'm going on a vacation with Phil."

He stopped playing. "Oh...."

"Yeah, we're going to Cedar Point in Ohio. It's an amusement park. We're spending a few nights together." Something about saying it out loud to him felt... uncomfortable enough for your stomach to tie itself into knots. Cronus was completely silent as he stared at the screen. You weren't sure what you wanted him to say, but you wanted him to say *something* . "So, sorry... I won't be available for brunch this weekend."

A faint crunching sound met your ears and you couldn't help but notice that the controller in Cronus' hands was beginning to sprout cracks, plastic splintering under his grip. "Things, uh," He licked his lips, "Things are getting serious between you two, ain't they?" He finally replied, tone strained.

"Yeah... I guess they are." You admitted, voice small, stomach nauseous. Sweat slicked your palms. Something in you wanted to scream... which was silly because things were great. Moving fast , (way too fast) but great.

Yes. Great.

The fractures along the sides of the controller began to deepen, weaving further and further from their focal point. There was no way it was still useable. He turned to you with one of the fakest smiles you had ever seen, eggy eyes now very much a vivid tangerine. "I'm so happy for you." He said through gritted teeth in the most unconvincing voice possible, a faint growl at the back of his throat as he spoke.

And you had no idea why but the fact that he showed such restraint made you want to shove him back on the couch, climb him like a tree, and kiss him until your lips were bruised and swollen.

You knew why.

It didn't matter why though because you had Phil, and these were just cold-feet type thoughts because you were about to be tied to him a lot more intensely than you had been before and you just.... You were scared. In the smallest recesses of your mind you admitted it to yourself.

Scared of making the wrong choice. Scared of getting hurt. Scared of-

You swallowed.

Cronus was watching you intently in a way you had almost missed... and it was stupid but you almost wanted to cry. He leaned in, cupping your cheek with one hand. "You don't look happy about it."

"What? Of course I'm happy about it." You didn't pull back as he leaned closer, bumping his nose with yours.

"You ain't as good a liar as you think."

You didn't know how to respond to that... every part of you wanted to close the gap because the ghost of his breath on your lips was driving you mad. He was so presumptuous to assume that you were lying about it though. (Weren't you?)

"It's normal to be a little nervous." You said after a long enough while had passed to be strictly decent. "And if I'm honest, I'm a little worried that my car won't really be able to make the entire trip."

His other hand came up to cup your other cheek. "So don't go. Stay here and we can do brunch this weekend."

"I already bought my ticket to get in, Cronus."

"I'll buy it off you. Stay and we can have brunch together. Just you 'n me." There was a chirpy whine in the back of his throat. "Just you 'n me."

"What about Blue? Don't they want to do brunch."

He made a conflicted, sour face. "It's not.... Don't.... No. Just you 'n me, kitten. And we can have all of the mimosas and saccharine treats and- and after that we can go visit the uh... the botanical gardens. Deeps, let's go on a trip together. You and me. We can go to that poison garden that you sometimes talk about." His voice was filled with near panicked desperation.

"Cronus...."

You made to pull away and Cronus made an ungodly noise like a thousand cricket chorus singing to the accompanyment of gravel in a blender , such a pained expression on his face that for a moment you worried he'd had some form of troll stroke and you'd need to take him to the alien hospital.

You weren't even sure where you could find those besides outer space .

He closed his eyes, resting his forehead against yours.

"I c'n get the tickets right now. Just say the word and we'll be on our way to Northumberland . It'd be nice, wouldn't it, kitten? You 'n me."

"I'm going to visit my boyfriend, Cronus." You replied sternly, but everything in you screamed at you to take him up on the offer. And not for the first time, you wondered if you were making the right **Decision.**

Your shuckboy friend just gave you an incredibly sad , hollow look as he whispered your name. "Kitten, he made you cry in the bad way."

You licked your lips, finding the corner of the room a lot more interesting than usual. "... I was being overemotional."

Cronus snorted, looking very much like he wanted to say something, but bit his tongue. "I can't stop you."

" You can't stop me." You repeated.

A soft sigh (that you could feel on your lips again and you wondered how his own would feel pressed against them instead) left him as he deflated .

He finally released you and sat back up. The destroyed controller in his lap caught his attention and he ran a grey hand through his hair. "Nyeh, guess we should probably watch something instead, huh?"

"Yeah, okay."

It didn't strike you until much later, within the confines of your tiny apartment.... Cronus knew where the Alnwick poison garden was .

You were nervous as you stepped into your old sedan, running through your mental checklist one more time. The engine sputtered to life and you hoped beyond hope that it would behave for the whole tripe and not break down and leave you stranded in fucking Ohio.

But even with your nervousness, you were excited. Sure, maybe he wanted to take things a little too fast, but you had been good friends for years. You were excited to finally meet him. Spend time with him. You couldn't wait to share cotton candy and ride a carousel together. Play crane games (or not.... you knew the sirens song well... knew that if you started, you would not be able to stop).

Go back to the motel room, cuddle up, and watch mindless tv together. Order takeout.

"I..." You started, taking a deep breath. "L-love you."

It was unconvincing at best, malicious at worst, and altogether more likely to do harm than good.

"I *love* you." You tried again. "*I* love you. I *looooove* you."

Surely changing the emphasis would make it more true.

You tried again. " *I* looove yooou . "

It began to sound less and less like individual words the more you repeated it, and the less it sounded like words, the easier it became to say.

This way everyone was happy....

.... right?

Driving for six hours on almost no sleep was not something you would recommend to anyone anytime soon. You were exhausted , eyes dropping as soon as you parked (not to mention dehydrated because you didn't want to keep pulling over for pee breaks).

The only thing preventing you from falling asleep on the spot was your own anxiety, and even then you were at the point where that didn't even feel like anything anymore. All you wanted was to get some blessed food, water, then pass out for the next ten hours.

You barely even cared that you were about to meet the man you'd been dating for the past year (of course you cared, you just would have cared more on a full tank).

He was leaning on the front of a jeep, dented, headlight cracked, looking at his phone. He looked up as your door opened and you... should have wanted to run into his arms and kiss him and... all you really wanted to do was grab something warm to eat and then go to sleep.

His face broke out into a smile which you tried to match (But knew you couldn't, you were just too fucking tired), "Hey there, good looking."

His voice was... weird in person. Well... not weird, just, not quite the same as hearing it through a microphone. Nicer... maybe?

"Hey, Phil."

You hugged and it was... *nice* (awkward probably would have been a better descriptor).

He pulled you in for a kiss but you turned your face at the last second (like some sort of coward (*you* told *yourself you wouldn't do this*)), and the kiss landed on your cheek. Your face heated up, an uncomfortable knot tying itself in your gut.

"Sorry, I'm just really tired," You mumbled. "Don't want our first kiss happening when I'm just about to pass out."

Shit... you should probably just skip dinner and go to bed instead....

Yeah... (d idn 't want to seem too prudish... just better to forgo eating at all and not make things more awkward than they already were).

"I... guess that makes sense." He grumbled, letting you go.

"I wanna be able to remember it." You gave him a half smile. Phil just shrugged in return.

So you checked in, checked the mattress for bedbugs, and upon finding none, rolled onto the extremely large (king sized! How decadent) bed. You just laid there for a moment, completely spread eagle like a cat in a particularly luxurious sunbeam .

Phil laughed, "What are you doing?"

"Sorry, I'll scooch over in a minute, but for now just let me relish in sleeping in such an extravagantly sized bed." You said through a faceful of pillows.

"Mind if I join you?"

You felt the bed dip and an arm wrap around your waist... your muscles froze in place, and you willed them, willed *yourself,* to stop being like this; Like some unsocialized lizard who couldn't interact with the other lizards... or humans properly.

You were fine.

You were okay.

"I forgot to change into my pajamas. I'll be right back."

Hopping up, you scurried over to the bathroom with your bag, gathering static electricity on the dubiously stained motel carpet like a Tesla Coil before locking yourself in. It took every fiber of your being not to launch into panic mode... this was your boyfriend and you weren't acting normal. Why weren't you acting normal (Why couldn't you be normal)?

Why couldn't you be normal?

Why couldn't you be just fucking normal?

This didn't happen with Cronus.

But you'd been drunk when you'd first had any physical contact other than a hand on a shoulder or arm or- or-

Maybe you should just get drunk?

Get drunk and just dive headfirst. Exposure therapy, baby.

But that would require going out and doing things and getting the alcohol... and you were just far too tired for any of that. Maybe you should just be honest with Phil and let him know that you weren't in the right headspace for cuddling right now.

What you wouldn't give for a xanax.

But as you washed your face, put on your PJs, and stared at yourself in the mirror, you felt the last of the energy begin to subside, and you trudged back out to the bed.

Phil was waiting for you, giving you some sort of randy grin, but he must have seen how tired you looked because it fell immediately. "Damn, you really weren't kidding about being tired, were you."

Less of a question, more of a statement.

You bit back the urge to be sarcastic.

"Yeah... I'm way too tired for anything tonight. I'm sorry, babe." You said with what you hoped was a mildly apologetic face.

He just patted the bed next to him giving you a sympathetic look. "It was a long drive for me too, you know."

You laid down next to him, uncomfortably aware of his arm snaking around you. "Then you must know how tired I am."

He just let out an annoyingly long sigh. You closed your eyes, and despite your immense discomfort, you began to drift off.

You weren't quite sure how you ended up there, alone on a little train going around the amusement park. Well... you were sure, you knew very vividly why, but it was still baffling. The first date of champions: sad kiddie rides around the park... alone... while your boyfriend went on the impossibly terrifying roller coaster without you.

Any other roller coaster you agreed to go on with him, but that one was just Too Tall and dropped almost straight down and even the thought of it made your stomach churn. And you'd told him as much....

"I'm not going on some kiddie crap. This is an amusement park."

While you understood why he'd chosen to go on the roller coaster... it still stung that that was what he'd said when you'd told him you wanted to ride the train. Because plenty of adults were riding it. It was nice and relaxing and fun and you were starting to get a headache because *of course you were* .

When you got off of it after the ten minute drive, you shot Phil a text and started heading for the middle of the park. When you didn't hear back from him, you got yourself a drink from

the fountain and found a shady spot to sit down because your head was really starting to pound now.

Probably from dehydration.

But even after finishing your drink, the throbbing in your skull was only getting worse.

You checked your phone restlessly, still nothing from Phil. All you wanted to do was lie down in the motel room where it was quiet and there weren't so many smells all around you. Couldn't the universe see you were in pain and needed a breather? Just a few minutes of reprieve from the hustle and bustle and screams and shouts and chatter and clanking and roaring of everything around you.

Why did you even have to go to this stupid amusement park anyway?

(Because the thought of anything more intimate made you want to crawl out of your skin).

(Though to be fair the thought of anything other than a cool, dark, quiet room with a thousand blankets on you made you want to crawl out of your skin right now).

You checked your phone again, groaning when again there was nothing from Phil.

Your nausea was getting worse, and you almost wondred if it was because you had nothing to eat yet today other than a greasy pretzel. You should probably have some real food at some point today. Like maybe spaghetti with marinara sauce. Hopefully that was an option for dinner. Or maybe Chinese food... but American Chinese food had a tendency to be heavy and you weren't sure your stomach could handle that.

You checked your phone again. It had been thirty minutes since you'd last texted him and still there was nothing.

Part of you wondered if he was ignoring you. It wasn't like rollercoaster rides took fifteen minutes... but maybe he had found someone in line to chat with and he was having an engrossing conversation with them.

You texted him again asking how the ride was.

Maybe you weren't feeling great, but you really didn't want to rain on his parade. The tickets to get in weren't exactly cheap, so unless you started feeling really awful, you weren't going to bring it up. Unless he asked, of course.

He still didn't respond.

You gave him another ten minutes as the pressure in your head continued to build.

You texted him again, "Hey, did you go on the ride yet?"

When he still hadn't texted you back another twenty minutes later, you caved. "Hey Phil, I'm not feeling great right now. I think I might need to go back to the motel room."

It only took him another five to get back to you. "im almost on the ride. wait for me."

You groaned, at least the urge to vomit was slowly subsiding. "Okay."

It took another thirty minutes for him to say "Okay I'm done, where are you?"

So you told him where to meet you and started downloading the uber app because you had both decided to be smart and not pay an arm and a leg for parking . You sat at the main entrance, watching the old carousel go around, wistfully recalling moments of riding them in your youth.... You thought about riding this one for the nostalgia alone .

But you held off , waiting for Phil silently on the bench. It took him almost twenty minutes to get there (and you were more than a little peeved. You'd told him the exact bench you were at).

"Hey, sorry about that." His words were stilted, very obviously not sorry in the slightest. You weren't about to bring it up.

"It's okay. I'm not feeling well though. I'm going to call an uber and go back to the motel room. You can stay here if you want though."

He looked torn for a moment before pinching the bridge of his nose. "I'll go with you."

You nodded and ordered an uber. It would take ten minutes to get here... and there was no line at the carousel, so you said, "Hey, I'm going to go ride that carousel before we leave. There's no line for it." One last little thing before you left for the day despite the vertigo you felt as you stood. "Wanna come with me?"

He just huffed and shook his head. "I already told you, I don't want to ride that kiddy shit."

You shrugged and rolled your eyes, going over there and picking the prettiest horse and sitting down.

To your immense relief, your nausea held off as you spun around. And when you got off, Phil was nowhere to be found.

Your uber would be here in seven minutes.

You texted him, frowning and heading towards the gates, sitting on the curb outside. He joined you wordlessly five minutes later.

The drive back was silent aside from the jovial chatter of your driver. And w hen you got back to the motel, the atmosphere was tense.... Nothing a little nap couldn't fix though... right?

Right.

You flopped down on the comfortable, luxurious, king sized mattress, spreading out like a starfish swaddled in decadence. If only you were feeling better, then you and Phil could test out how springy it was for real.

"I'm gonna take a nap." You mumbled into a pillow.

"Fine." His reply was terse. Probably because he was upset his day at the park was cut short. Understandable... it *was* expensive after all. And it was only like two in the afternoon so there was a lot you guys were missing. But he dropped it all to go back to the motel room with you which was really sweet of him. What a sweet boyfriend.

You didn't deserve him.

"'m sorry for ruining your day."

He just let out a little hum, and the bed dipped as he sat down.

You felt his hand on your back as you drifted off to sleep.

The bed was much too large and plush to be yours... the covers a soft linen or cotton instead of your cozy fleece. Your eyes bolted open and... oh, right. You were at a motel. The room was dark save for the light filtering in through the heavy blinds. You could hear the sink going in the bathroom. Your loving, understanding boyfriend, no doubt.

As he emerged, he gave you a once-over. "I love you."

"I," You laughed nervously, willing yourself to just say it.

It wasn't hard.

Just.

Say.

It.

He let out a frustrated huff. "How long?"

"What?" You furrowed your brow. You'd sort of expected him to be a little upset. *You* were a little upset honestly. Like, what the actual fuck? You'd practiced that shit for five out of those six hours driving.

"Have you been cheating on me. *How long* have you been cheating on me?"

You blinked. *What?*

"What?"

"It's obvious you have a guilty conscience! Why else would you be avoiding saying it?" He wasn't yelling, but his voice was definitely a few decibels louder than it had been before.

"No. What the actual fuck kind of logical are you using?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Look, just stop lying to me. I'll forgive you, just be honest with me." Phil insisted, an edge to his tone.

"I didn-"

"Stop lying to me! Just admit it!"

"I never cheated on-"

"*Just fucking admit it!!*"

"Phil, let me speak!" It was the first time you'd raised your voice in a long while, and when he just crossed his arms, you lowered it again. "I've never... I would *never* do that to you." You hated the way you shook, voice quavery. "Do you really think so little of me?"

He let out a sigh, rubbing his forehead. "Then just say it."

You swallowed. "Say what?"

"You already know what." He ground out through gritted teeth.

"What, you want me to admit to something I didn't do? Would *never* do? Why are you so insistent?" Your heart pounded in your chest, threatening to jump up your throat, kick out your teeth, then run away out of your mouth.

Phil didn't meet your eyes.

"Why, Phil?" You whispered, "Why do you want to believe I did *that* more than you want to believe me?"

He stared at the corner of the room, clenching and unclenching his hands and you felt your intestines twist into an uncomfortable, leaden knot.

"Phil... is there something you want to tell me?"

"I'm breaking up with you." He said finally.

It hit you like a punch to the gut.

"What? Why?"Your headache was rushing back into your skull like a stampeding heard of bison.

"I guess I just don't love you as much as I thought I did." He finally looked at you again.

Bile threatened the edge of your esophagus.

"And if I'm being honest, how dare you keep lying to me about Cronus?" Your name was a curse on his lips as he spat it out like some bitter, vile substance, "People don't just write seven minute songs about waking up next to their best friend unless they're fucking! And despite all that you kept refusing to tell me you loved me even though you knew how distressing it was for me! Do you know how many people I had to sleep with to get even an ounce of confidence back after that?"

"W-what?"

"Do you *know* what it's like to need to find comfort in someone else's arms because your partner is cheating on you? Do you know what it's like to deal with the emotional neglect you put me through all the time?" He continued, "You're so selfish!"

"You... you cheated on me?" To your credit, your voice did not crack .

"How could I not? I needed *something* from *someone."* Each word felt like you were being pelted with bricks... but you weren't sad.

You were pretty sure you should have felt sad. Should have been crying.

But all you could feel was a burning rage... bubbling, boiling, white hot, and you were sure it was going to seep out of your pores like morning dew. Your fingers stretched and flexed, dying to shred and claw at him, your teeth aching to bite and tear. But you weren't that person.... You were better than that.

Better than him.

But as he turned to leave with a huff, mouth moving (he was saying something, but the roaring in your ears drowned him out), something in you snapped, and before you could stop, you found yourself wrenching him back by the shoulder and shoving him up against the wall.

(Hopefully hard enough to bruise).

"Listen here, you little, disgusting, loathsome man." You hissed. "You can't break up with me because *I'm* breaking up with *you!* How... How fucking *dare* you!? The sheer audacity- I'm- *Do you know how many fucking chances I had to cheat on you*? Dozens! Hundreds maybe! But I didn't because I'm not a piece of literal shit! I didn't because I didn't want to hurt you, and I wanted to honor what we had! I... I can't believe I *trusted* you." You wanted nothing more than to sink your teeth into his neck and rip into his flesh, to let his blood wet your tongue and redden your lips. "I could be visiting botanical gardens all over Europe right now with someone who genuinely cares about me! I could be anywhere but this stupid, dingey motel room right now! I... I drove for six fucking hours to see you because I thought you *loved* me! You know I practiced saying 'I love you too' on the whole drive here?"

You let out a breath before stepping back.

"Get out."

"No, fuck you!"

"I said ***GET OUT!!!*** " You snarled, practically throwing him out the door before slamming it in his face and locking it.

You could hear it rattling as he tried to get in, and you gathered up all of his shit around the room, opened the door again, and threw it in his face. "Never talk to me again."

For the second time you slammed the door.

You paced around your room restlessly like a tiger in a cage , listening to Phil's cursing and shouting and vitriol. But eventually it petered out and you heard him drive away. Part of you was afraid he'd keyed your car, but if he had you were going to sue him and he couldn't afford that.

Eventually you sat down, hands shaky as the adrenaline began to wear off. You weren't sad that it ended. (Hell, if you were being honest, a small part of you was even relieved).

But to have it end like this....

You'd trusted him.

A drop of water hit the skin of your wrist, startling you as you looked up for a leak.

There was none, but the drops kept falling all the same.

Finals Week

Chapter Summary

In which you lament chances passed

Chapter Notes

lays this gingerly at your feet

I want to thank everyone who has read, liked, commented, translated, drawn fanart, given me song recs for this fic, just all of you are so, so awesome. It's overwhelming sometimes thinking about how far this fic has come. I love all of you very much, and thank you all so much for your patience.

Annuum was out when you got back. You knew they would be, you'd known they had taken the week off for "personal business." (You didn't know much more than that, you hadn't pried). But it was still jarring working alone in the greenhouse and the communal office. You wanted to tell someone, *anyone,* about what had happened to you at Cedar Point.

Though what would you even say?

"Boohoo, the boyfriend I had been growing cold with and didn't love cheated on me because he didn't love me either. Boohoohoo!"

Pathetic.

They'd probably say "I told you to dump him." And they would be right. They did! Both in person and in your dreams!

But you didn't listen to them. You were stubborn and told yourself that this malignant, dying, pathetic excuse for a relationship would work out. Because why?

Why the fuck didn't you break it off the first time he made you feel uncomfortable?

Why the fuck didn't you break it off as soon as you realized you couldn't say "I love you"?

Everyone saw the signs.

Everyone.

Even you (if you were being completely honest).

Why didn't you listen to them?

You wanted to cry. To scream. But with your luck a student would be walking in for office hours any second and you'd look like an idiot. So instead, you resolved to buy yourself some Ben & Jerry's as a treat when you got out of work because that was cheaper than therapy and you wouldn't have to bother any of your friends by crying to them about it like some sort of pitiful orphan begging for scraps of affection like a crust of stale bread.

Besides... no one liked a downer.

You sighed, burying your face in your hands and stifling the urge to sniffle.

You were stronger than that.

Stronger than *him*.

And dear *God* how the *fuck* were you even supposed to tell Cronus? "Heeeey Cro bb I made a mistake and Phil cheated on me anyways do you wanna make out really sloppily on your sofa now?"

No... he had a partner now that things were going well with.

Just say the word and we'll be on our way to Northumberland . It'd be nice, wouldn't it, kitten? You 'n me.

You chewed your bottom lip. He'd meant it, hadn't he? You taking that trip together? He'd sounded so serious.

But the thought of being the one to wreck his relationship was enough to make you gag.

No... nobody liked a downer.

You could just scream about it into the void of your blog. Nobody you knew went there anyways so it worked out.

Instead of being responsible and grading the rest of the papers on your desk like you should have, you slumped back in your chair and began twirling (which, of course, only made you slightly nauseous instead of happy). You whipped out your phone, noticing a text from Phil.

It took every ounce of strength in your body not to hurl that stupid little rectangle across the room and watch it shatter into a thousand pieces. Against your better judgment you read it, and the pit of your stomach turned to lead while your blood boiled. He wasn't going to pay you back for his half of the room. You'd put the motel expense in your name, and you had both agreed to pay half.

Now he was backing out. Absolutely ridiculous!

You honestly didn't even know what you expected from him.... Filthy, lying, cheating scumbag. And now a thief. You opted to send him a nasty response then blocked his number (you weren't sure why you hadn't done that already).

There was no use in reasoning with someone who had such a warped sense of logic anyways.

You were still going to get Ben & Jerry's tonight. You weren't going to let him ruin that for you.

Ramen and Ben & Jerry's. The dinner of champions.

Maybe skip the ramen and just eat the whole pint instead.

Yeah , that sounded like a plan.

The days dragged on without Annuum. Cronus still hadn't asked how it had gone with you and Phil. In fact, he hadn't messaged you much at all over the week. He hadn"t invited you to play or watch movies or hang out. On Wednesday he'd finally sent you a discord message (you still couldn't believe you hadn't given him your number yet) talking about how amazing Blue was and how he couldn't wait for you to meet them. And that he was looking forward to hanging out on Thursday.

You really hoped he didn't just spend the time gushing about his wonderful datemate. You wondered if he'd already proposed to them... three or four dates sounded about right for a Cronus proposal. It was enough to make a little giggle escape.

What a goober.

He'd really come such a long way though from the impossibly disgusting mess you'd met so many months ago. (How could you not want to kiss him).

But he wasn't yours to kiss, and he probably never would be.

It shouldn't have been as upsetting as you found it. After all, *you* were the one who kept turning him down. How many times had you rejected his advancements even after you had started wanting more? He'd probably laugh in your face if you were to come crawling back to him after all that.

"Kitten, I'm flattered, but you told me to move on. A lot. And guess what, I moved the fuck on! There was a time I would have given anything for a relationship with you, and now is the

time you choose to say you want me? Nah. Ain't happenin'," He'd say with a sneer.

No... there was no way you could tell him about Phil, and how you'd made a terrible mistake. He'd probably think you were the most pitiable person on the planet, but he wouldn't want you now. Not when he had Blue... and you were no home wrecker.

He wasn't waiting for you when you pulled up to the driveway, and you took a moment to steady your thoughts and clear your head. You just had to focus on math for a little while. Just math for at least an hour.

No stupid emotions.

No stupid thoughts.

Just math. Clean, simple math.

Your pack was heavy on your shoulder as you knocked on the door and waited.

How would you respond if Cronus asked you how things had gone with Phil?

.... Probably a simple, "Phil and I broke up. It wasn't great. How was your weekend?"

Yeah, nice and easy that way. And if he kept prying then maybe, just maybe you'd tell him about it all. About the cheating, and lying, and now *thievery*. And he'd say, "I told you he was bad news." Then hug you a little, but in an awkward light way and not the bone crushing way you so desperately wanted.

Eventually Cronus opened the door, looking a little less put together than usual. His hair which was almost always meticulously slicked back had a few curls out of place. His deep set eyes had darker circles under them. But most of all, he smelled like he'd taken a bath in a bottle of vodka.

"Hey, kitten," He grinned, showing off his impressively sharky teeth. B ut something was off. (Though to be fair, you were off too .... Hell, maybe it was just you being off and projecting on to him). "What do you wanna do tonight?"

(~~*You*~~).

"Hmmmm, does Thai food and shitty horror movies sound good? I don't mean like bad horror movies. I mean like pirhanasaurus or whatever the fuck Z-List SyFy originals they have out there." You batted your eyelashes charmingly at him knowing he would almost definitely get you the basil fried rice you were so desperately craving.

And some mango sticky rice.

And Maybe some dumplings....

... And spring rolls.

You'd share them of course (after all, he would be paying).

"Sounds good, kitten." The corners of his eyes were tinged a faint violet... bloodshot.

Sometimes it was easy to forget that his blood was a different color from everything on your planet. You wondered how his side was doing.... He'd said he felt great, invincible even, the last time that you had asked. You wondered if it had left a scar. *You wondered what it would be like to touch him again without him bleeding and bruised....*

You weren't crazy enough to go around asking him about it though. That night was... a one off.

Something to burn in your heart but not something that you could go around repeating. ... Yeah... a one time thing.

But you couldn't help but wonder what would have happened had you accepted his invitation to stay the night ... if Phil hadn't been in the picture. If you'd broken up with him as soon as things had started to go south. You wondered if Cronus would have offered you a guest room, or if you would have even asked for one (you wouldn't have). There would have been too much electricity running through your veins to have slept. It wouldn't have mattered because he would have pulled you close and kissed you hard, and you would have let him. You would kiss him back with just as much enthusiasm, pulling back just enough to ask him what he wanted.

And he would have replied with a simple, breathless, "You."

Would you have ravished him right then and there? Or would you have pulled him to the bathroom first, helping him disrobe and washing him off. Gently exploring his body under the water while you-

"So, I guess I'll go pick out some movies while you tutor Danny-boy." Cronus' voice snapped you from your thoughts. Your cheeks flushed something fierce because you had zoned out having lewd thoughts about your best friend while you were in the middle of talking with him. Jesus fuck you needed to get laid and fast.

"J-just make sure that the directors didn't have a budget of more than ten dollars, and the CGI looks like it's from the early 2000s." You finally managed to stumble out.

He nodded like he knew what that meant, "Anything you want, kitten. I'll see you in a little bit."

With that he turned and left, giving you the time you needed to calm down from your blushing fit before Eridan came downstairs.

You'd still never actually been upstairs though, now that you thought about it. Never been in Cronus' room. Never even seen a picture of Cronus' room. He'd probably show you if you asked. But you knew better than to ask. Knew better than to be a serpent in the Garden of Eden who tempted your shuckboy into indulging in things forbidden. Some beguiling, coy weaver of webs that ensnared him. He was not yours to-

Eridan's book thudded on the table. "Afternoon." He said, not quite tersely.

"Good afternoon, Eridan. Ready for some math?" You said far, far too cheerily.

The young troll squinted at you, half leaning on his chair.

Today he was wearing a sleeveless violet and magenta sun dress that went up and formed a small ring around his neck. It was a very beautiful dress. He really looked quite dashing in it. "Don't you look fancy today, Eridan."

He grinned a little at that, still looking a little bit awkward (when didn't he look a little bit awkward though), and sat down next to you. "I know, I am quite fetching, and the noble colors really accentuate my eyes."

You hadn't really noticed until he said anything, but the rim around his iris did have a distinctly violet hue to the grey. You wouldn't have caught it on your own, but you were pretty sure that was a new development.

"Wow! It really does, doesn't it." You said hoping that you didn't sound sarcastic with your animated remark.

Eridan looked incredibly smug about it , but you could see the violet flush creeping along his fins and cheeks. "It's good of you to say."

You tried to get him to focus more on his math instead of the gold and violet nail polish he wore, but for some reason he just wasn't paying much attention. Though you supposed that made two of you.

He looked like he desperately wanted to say something, but you weren't sure what, and knowing him it could be a mixed bag of sweet or some of the absolute most batshit troll-racist thing... though in his defense he had stopped a lot of that. You hadn't heard him be a racist in like... at least two months. Which was very impressive for him. He'd really taken to therapy like a fish to water (HA!).

But he was acting a bit odd... fidgeting a lot, sweating a little, things that you would normally chalk up to being a teenager. But Eridan was n't really what you would call a "normal teenager." For a moment you were worried that perhaps he was feeling ill.

And just as you decided to ask hi m, but before you could get the words out of your mouth, he began to speak. "My lusus is out of the house for the night."

Oh god.

Oh god please don't let this be a come on. Please don't let this be one of those awkward kid crushes on the hot twenty- somethings teacher. Please for the love of all things good and holy.

But you didn't jump to conclusions because when you jumped to conclusions they weren't always right. So you just waited patiently for him to continue.

" M y therapist wants me to think critically aboat everyfin , and I think I resent my lusus. " He continued, and suddenly you felt a bit sad for this child . "He's very critical of everyfin I do. The only thing he ever praised me for was culling and hunting other lusii. It's not that I'm

not grateful that he chose me from the caverns, but I feel like he's never let me be myself. But you, you're like Shrek."

You blinked.

That had taken an unexpected turn... you knew he'd watched Shrek before but you had no idea what that could even mean . That you were someho w ugly but still charming? That you were like an onion with layers? That you smelled bad?

You weren't quite sure how to respond. He stared at you, a little fidgety, expectantly. When you still just gave him a blank psuedo-smile he finally looked away and mumbled out, "It was a compliment, never mind."

"Sorry, I just wasn't really sure what you meant by it. But, um, thank you. Shrek is a good person to be compared to." (You guessed). Well, he was pretty good actually. He was brave, and unapologetic in who he was, and clever. So, you nudged him with your elbow. "But what makes you say that?"

It took him a while to respond, but you gave him the time, Cronus could wait.

"When I was a wriggler I... really liked Shrek . Shrek never cared about what people wore, or their gender, or any fin like that. He took people as they were even if they were ugly. Even if they were built *wrong* . He was even willing to change for the people he cared about in Shrek 2." He spoke quickly and mumbled most of it, but it was touching because well... how could it not be?

Eridan said the last part so quietly you wouldn't have caught it unless you were giving him your undivided attention, and even then it was hard to make out. "Maybe the lusus I hunted should have been my own."

You didn't know what to say to any of that.

You weren't sure you trusted yourself to speak.

So instead you placed an arm on his shoulder, hoping that you were able to convey how much that meant to you with that simple gesture. You wanted to hug him, but you weren't sure if that was something he'd want, and you didn't want to ruin the moment.

Eridan, this lost young little alien kid (who was much taller than you), looked at you, and fuck it, you pulled him in for a hug because he looked like he needed one. Bone crushing. Or at least as bone crushing as you could make it for a boy with chitinous skin. Because no matter how alien he was, you really were convinced that trolls weren't all that different. You both still needed that human... no, personal connection. The need to know that you weren't in this alone.

His muscles went rigid for a moment before his arms wrapped around you, squeezing you back hard enough that it actually hurt. But you didn't mind. You would be fine. What were a few bruises for a hug between two inter-generational interspecies friend s ?

"No one is built wrong." You whispered, and he just clung tighter. You weren't sure how you hadn't popped like a grape.

You had no idea how long the hug lasted, but your arms had started to go numb before he finally released you. His eyes were a little glassy when you pulled back and he sniffled a little, but you didn't bring it up. "That was a very sweet compliment, Eridan. Thank you." When he nodded awkwardly, you just cracked a smile and said in the best approximation of Shrek imitation , "Looks like trolls, much like ogres, are like onions. And when you have a while to simmer and soften, you can get very sweet."

"I can't eat onions." He mumbled, looking away from you and pu rsing his lips. "But thanks."

"Oh... well, uh, onions are good. I'm sorry you can't eat them." You replied awkwardly. For a moment, you wondered if Cronus couldn't have them either. You fe lt like that was something he would have told you when you were getting thai food since onions were a big part of most... well, basically every culture. Every culture (probably) liked onions. Especially cooked onions.

That would probably be something you should ask him. Just in case he ever wanted to cook with you or you ever wanted to make him anything. Not that you would.

But it was nice to think about sometimes.

Maybe.

The domesticity of it made your skin crawl a little , and you weren't sure if it was in the good way or the bad way. But still....

Eridan was a little less sweaty and awkward as you wrapped up your session , but still a little fidgety, and he excused himself to go back to his "respite block" shortly after, though about halfway up the stairs he turned and said a quick, "Thanks."

He wasn't a bad kid.

Though it did make you feel old and weird now that you had him basically tell you that he wished you'd been his parental figure growing up. But it was a welcome distraction from the stupid emotions you were feeling for Cronus, so you tried to focus on the weirdness instead of the stupid desire building in your gut as you walked down the stairs to the basement.

You counted the doors, wondering what exactly was in each one of them, when you finally came to the one you actually did know the contents of.

Cronus greeted you as you came in, a bottle of Grey Goose between his lips. He ducked a little when you came in, grinning and setting it down on the table. No wonder he smelled like vodka....

"How's my kitten doin' today?"

"Good, good." You said without even thinking. Best to keep things light for now. If he asked, you'd tell him, but he didn't seem to be in the right sort of headspace to do more than light

and airy. "How about you?"

"I'm doing excellent." He responded, smile wide and toothy. "Things between Blue 'n me are great."

(You hadn't asked, but okay.)

You were happy for him though. Even if he did reek of alcohol.

"Good. I'm glad things are going well for you two." You replied stiffly. Natural. You needed to act more natural. "You uh... you drink that whole thing?" You asked, desperate to change the subject.

"What?" He looked at you dumbfounded before you gestured to the bottle. "Oh, yeah, haha."

You wondered if he had a liver because if he did it was probably working overtime. "Isn't that kind of a lot?"

He rolled his eyes and waved you off. "I'm fine, kitten. Blue and me, we just like to party. Don't spoil the party, kitten."

You kept your lips shut, an overwhelming urge to just run away winding its way through your throat and suffocating you. Because you were spoiling the party. You were spoiling his party with your gloomy goose tendencies.

You were spoiling the party.

You wanted to curl up and die.

But you just smiled at him, not trusting yourself to speak and shrugged your shoulders.

You'd already lost your boyfriend, someone you had trusted to have your best interests at heart... you didn't want to lose your best friend too.

He didn't seem to notice the stupid glassy way your eyes shined, or if he did, he didn't care. Either way it didn't matter. You just sat at the far end of the couch because you were afraid if he went in to touch you you would shatter into a thousand pieces like a mirror falling from a third story balcony.

Seven years' bad luck.

He didn't make a move to, just looking at you with his dopey, drunk eyes, that seemed far more sad than they had any right to be. But that was probably just you projecting.

You had a bad habit of doing that... probably.

Seeing things that weren't there.

Missing things that were.

"So, we orderin' food? You want Thai or Chinese? I'm down for either." He said, pulling out his phone. You shrugged, and he gave you a dry look. "Kitten, that ain't an answer."

Cronus stared you down, waiting, and you finally managed to squeak out, "Chinese."

You really just wanted dumplings and mango sticky rice.... But ordering from two restaurants seemed like such a waste.

"Better. See? Makin' a decision ain't so hard."

That felt like a jab at you. You *had* made a decision before.... Was it the right decision? No. Did you regret it? Immensely. But you had made a decision.

You were probably just reading too much into things that weren't there again though.

Or maybe you weren't. Who the fuck knew? Who the fuck gave a shit? (You did).

But you did your best not to.

So you bit the inside of your lip and stared at the screen instead. Something easy, casual, you didn't have to speak as long as you were watching something mindless. Didn't have to think if you were watching something stupid . Didn't have to worry or care when you were watching a pirhanasaurus rex chase down a bunch of scientists around a poorly rendered green screen lab.

Part of you almost wished it were you up there. Running for your life from some stupid gene-splicing project gone awry instead of sitting in uncomfortable silence while Cronus' eyes bored a hole in your skull. You wished he would stop examining you like some specimen under a microscope. There was nothing more to see.

You actually didn't talk all that much while the movie played. In fact, if you were honest, it was incredibly awkward and uncomfortable because he just kept staring at you unabashedly with a neutral look on his face that you couldn't quite decipher, and when the food finally arrived, you jumped at the chance to get out of that god forsaken room.

You took the steps two at a time, and thanked the delivery boy like he was a saint curing you of a pox, reaching into your own wallet to tip him the few dollars you had in there on top of what Cronus had already given through the app.

The delivery boy looked from the money to the house and you suddenly felt very... very small again. You got a half smile from him and a nod before he left you at the door half ready to cry and scream out that you didn't live here. That that was all you had in your pocket. That....

That, god, you were a fucking wreck of a human being.

But you weren't going to cry.

You weren't going to cry.

Everything was fine. You were just feeling a lot of things right now and you just needed to work through it. You didn't rush back down the stairs, instead stopping in the kitchen for a breather, and popping a dumpling whole into your mouth. You chewed slowly, savoring the delectable flavor of fresh dumplings. The heat as you swallowed was soothing....

Your blood sugar was just low (sure, that was it).

You ate another one, wondering if Cronus thought you were taking too long.

Shit....

Why was life so complicated.... Cronus was your best friend. Why did it have to be so weird now that Phil was gone. It shouldn't have been weird. It should have been simple, and easy, and well... without Phil in the picture you should have....

No.

You'd missed your chance, and you needed to make peace with that, and the sooner that you made peace with that, the sooner things could go back to normal.

You nodded, stuffing one more dumpling into your face hole and wishing you had made him buy you more.

You could always just buy more if you'd sold that fucking ring.

Not like he cared if you did anymore.

You plodded down to the basement again, feet heavy with each step.

"Food's here." You plopped the bag down on his coffee table, fishing out your dumplings and fried rice.

"Thank glub, I'm starving." He pulled open his container and ate with the ravenous furiousity only a drunk frat boy could muster.

You tried your best to savor your food (if you spent the entire evening with your mouth full, you wouldn't need to speak), watching him eat with gusto. It was like watching a shark tear into a seal the way his teeth sliced through his egg roll without any sort of crushing force.

You made some small talk between bites, mostly commentary on the movie you were watching, It was ridiculously bad. And you definitely felt a little less fragile by the time it was over.

And then he dropped the bomb shell. "Blue really wants to meet you."

You almost choked on your last dumpling. So instead of being normal, you just made a few noises through your full mouth hoping that that was an appropriate response to that.

"Maybe if you're not doing anything this weekend, we could all go out to brunch? There's something called 'Frenched Toast' that I think you'll really enjoy." He waggled his brows as

though the offer were something tempting instead of something that made panic creep along your spine.

You chewed as slowly as you could without being completely suspicious before swallowing and saying, "Sorry, I'm going to be very busy this weekend."

"I know you got date night with Phil," You winced. "But brunch is early in the day. And you have plenty of time to work on your school stuff, c'mon-"

"Cronus, I said no." You snapped. Then let out a more gentle, "I have to work on my dissertation. I won't have time this weekend."

He just rolled his eyes, sticking his bottom lip out in a pout. " Fine, how bout next weekend? "

"I... I have a lot to do. I'll have to see." You weren't lying. You did have a lot of things to do. And, sure, maybe you didn't want to meet Blue, but that didn't mean that you didn't have things that needed doing.

"Fiiiiine."

You both sat in awkward silence for a few minutes after that.

"You wanna watch another one?" Cronus asked, but you shook your head.

"I kind of have a lot to do... but it was fun. I had fun. Thanks for dinner." You replied, standing up and putting all of your takeout containers into the bag to take upstairs.

"For you? Anytime, kitten." He flashed you a toothy smile, and you beat down your fluttering heart because this was your best friend. You'd missed your opportunity. You needed to stop this stupid crush.

You smiled back, and he walked you out, taking the bag from you and putting it on the counter.

"Drive safe, okay?"

"Will do." You replied, closing the door behind you.

His teeth nipped at your neck, tongue languidly swiping over the spot to soothe it. You shoved him with your foot, giggling and looking at him from under your lashes. "I think you're a little too dressed right now." You twirled your finger and gave him your most sultry grin.

He practically purred, pulling his shirt over his head and flinging it across the room. You took a moment to admire his form, leaning back in the chair as he gave you a spin.

You licked your lips.

"Like what you see, kitten?"

Your eyes flew open, an uncomfortable heat in your groin. Jesus *FUCK* did you need to get laid.

The dull light of your phone informed you that you had exactly thirteen more minutes until your alarm went off and you had to get up for the day.

You wanted so desperately to chase that dream, or at least to not be horny anymore but something about masturbating to your best friend who was in a relationship with someone else didn't quite sit right with you.

Why not? After all, he'd probably do it in your position.

You groaned and buried your head in your pillow. You weren't going to have this conversation with yourself. Nope. Nope. Nope.

The thought of going in to work made you want to scream, but you got up out of bed anyway (resisting the urge to cry even).

You checked your notifications, seeing that Cronus had sent you a message confirming brunch for this weekend. You typed up a quick reply.

It wasn't until several hours later that you realized what you had just agreed to.

The brunch place was a bit packed as you waited for Cronus and Blue, compulsively checking your phone every thirty seconds for either a text to relieve you from this dreaded social obligation or for enough time to have elapsed where you could just have an excuse to

leave. So far neither had occurred. Not that you really expected it. The universe truly did love to torment you after all.

Agonizingly slowly the minutes dragged on, and you could tell that the waiter was starting to get anxious for you to order something other than a single mimosa.

You took little baby sips of it because it was grossly expensive , and if Cronus didn't show you'd be stuck with the bill for it. Fourteen dollars for a mimosa.

After exactly twelve minutes had passed since you had ordered that ridiculously overpriced bubbly adult orange juice, you spotted Cronus at the front door , someone trailing behind him.

(Someone... as though you didn't already know who it was without a shred of doubt in your mind).

They were *tall* . Not Cronus tall because that bitch was at least seven feet tall at this point, horns almost catching on the doorway as he ducked down to enter, but you had to guess not much more than a head shorter than he was, standing at least a few inches taller than the maitre di. Their hair was blond, shoulder length, and professionally tousled ; Their makeup sharp, expertly done. And they were the pinnacle of skinny, rich, androgyny.

Cronus caught your eye and grinned, wide and toothy, making your stomach do a nauseating little flip because he grabbed Blue's hand and pulled them along with him.

"Kitten! You're here!"

"Yup!" You responded, voice just a smidge too high. You stood up, wondering if you should go in for a hug, but Blue stepped forward, looking you up and down.

"So you're this kitten that I keep hearing about."

It took every ounce of strength in your body not to punch them. It was a testament to your resounding will of steel , actually .

"Sorry, Blue, that's not my name , t hough Cronus calls me it enough that I can see how that might come as a surprise ." You provided your actual name to them, extending a hand for them to shake.

"I know." They said with a smile so cloying that you wanted nothing more than to strangle them. "But I think it's cute that that's what Cronus calls you."

"Oh, does he not call you that?" You asked sweetly.

"No, he calls me his little bluejay."

Shit... that was cute.

But... Cronus wasn't calling them kitten, and something about that made your heart flutter a little bit. (Something to be just a little smug about. You were Cronus' *only* kitten... Wait-)

Their long, red, manicured nails scraped lightly against your skin as they clasped your hand, their own uncomfortably limp like a dead fish in your grasp. You released them, not breaking eye contact for even a second . You were vaguely aware of Cronus saying something, but you were so focused on your little stare - down that you couldn't quite grasp the words.

You finally let go of the ir hand , sitting down and motioning for them both to take seats across from you , a very wide smile on your face. "I'm so *glad* we're getting to *do this.* "

"Me too, kitten." Cronus said without even a speck of insincerity in his voice. He sat down, a giant smile on his face. "So, What are you gonna order, kitten, it's on me."

The visceral reaction to the vivid image of eating brunch off of him wedged its way firmly into your brain almost made you bowl over, flush already starting to creep over your face. God you needed to stop being so creepy about this. He was your friend for goodness sake. (Your friend who was probably wholeheartedly in love with his partner....).

What would that feel like....

To wholeheartedly love someone who loved you back?

You swallowed and busied yourself with your mimosa and burying your face in the menu.

Easy. Just order some hash browns. Just get as many hash browns as you could stuff in your face. Hash browns with mushrooms, and onions, and tomatoes, and maybe a cinnamon roll or two. Maybe some french toast..... And like twelve more mimosas. Wait... no, you'd say something stupid if you got tipsy. So just a lot of orange juice and tea.

"My two favorite people in the whole world. Getting along great. How great is this?" Cronus said as though you and Blue were getting to be the best of chums. You swallowed down the panic in your throat.

He wanted you two to be friends. You could try for him.

And really, there was nothing wrong with Blue. It was all in your mind. They were probably an absolutely delightful person if you gave them the chance. So despite all of the alarm bells going off in your head, and the way their eyes lingered on your probably slightly muddy shoes, you took in a breath and put down the menu so you could look at them.

"So, Blue, what is it that you do?" You kept your voice light, airy. Because surely they did *something*.

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that. I don't really like being tied down to one place, you know?" They replied with a smile. (The daggers were almost definitely imagined.) "And what is it that *you* do?" They seemed friendly enough.

"I'm studying mycology. Just finished my masters, currently working on my PhD." That sounded impressive. Definitely sounded like you had a concrete notion of what you were doing in life instead of this vague, nebulous drive to just live in the forest and cover yourself with loam and leaves like a worm.

Blue's polite smile didn't drop. "That's fun. Not a lot prospects in that field though, I'd imagine." Their smile turned to a look of pity and you wanted to die.

You were a worm. Just a humble little worm....

Of course there weren't many prospects in your field. "Well, I'm uh- I'm *hoping* for a professorship after everything is done , or a field research position." Your voice felt like a weak shield against the onslaught of their questions.... This was almost as bad as defending your decisions over Thanksgiving dinner.

"That's so brave of you. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have anything to fall back on. Especially since most places don't want to hire people who are overqualified for positions." Their smile was genuine.... It had to be. It had to be. Because if it wasn't, it meant that they were toying with you. "And it seems like you don't really have anything to fall back on, do you? No offense."

How- How did they know-

"Can I get anybody anything to drink today?" The waitress chimed in like a heavenly choir, angelic and beautiful. You could have kissed her right then and there.

Cronus, oblivious as ever, just replied with, "A round of mimosas for my favorite people."

"And some extra orange juice for me please." You spoke up, voice just a bit too high again. (If you weren't careful, people might think you were about to panic).

How preposterous. You? Panic?

" It's so swee t that I'm your favorite person," Blue gave him a look like they could eat him alive as they planted an exaggerated kiss on his cheek, a violet blush blooming from the contact. "You're just the cutest."

Yeah, they were definitely fucking.

They were definitely fucking and now you couldn't get the stupid mental image out of your stupid brain. Surely this was universal recompense for every horrible act you had ever committed. Hell must exist within the mind.

Because all you could think about was Blue sucking hickies into his neck while he giggled like a lovesick dope.

"-Shrooms do you like?" You blinked, realizing that you were being addressed.

Fuck. You'd completely missed the first half of the sentence like a complete idiot.

"Sorry, I was in the middle of reading the menu, could you repeat that?"

Blue just gave you that perfectly pearly white smile and said, "I asked what sort of mushrooms you like?"

"Well, it's not just mushrooms, it's all of the Fungi Kingdom. Everything from slime molds all the way up to the great *amarillia ostoyae* cluster in Oregon. I love them all. Neither plant nor animal, but rather something completely different that transcends and redefines what we consider life." You shrugged. "What sorts of things are you into?" (Other than partying it up with Cronus).

"Well, I was studying accounting for a while, but I found that it just wasn't really all that stimulating. I'm mostly into theater and directing nowadays."

"Are you looking into going to Hollywood? I bet those sorts of jobs could be difficult in rural New Jersey." You smiled back.

"Nah, I'm close enough to Broadway that I can just commute when I want. Besides, I'm not really looking at jobs right now. I'm still young, why would I want to devote myself to one thing? No offence intended."

"None taken. I understand some people find it difficult to give themselves fully to one thing."

Their eyes narrowed just a little bit, and you were so very certain that their grip on Cronus' arm tightened.

"Blue says they have some contacts in the Earth music industry that they said they'd talk to for me." He interjected, patting their hand with his own and pressing a kiss to their cheek. "Isn't that great?"

Isn't that great?

You wanted to bite someone and not even in the sexy way (except Cronus, who you very much wanted to-). No.

No, he and Blue were obviously super into each other and you weren't a homewrecker.

"That's fantastic, Cronus. I'm so happy for you."

Your drinks arrived and you thanked the waitress profusely.

"Are you guys ready to order?"

You ordered hash browns. Lots of them. With tomatoes, and mushrooms, and spinach, and onions. And fuck it, you'd order some for tonight's dinner or tomorrow's lunch or something. Make him pay for your time here, dealing with all of this shit.

"You two really do make the most handsome couple, you know that?" You said with a smile you were half convinced was just a grimace. Raising your mimosa up, you gestured to them. "To the happy couple. Long may your love last."

Each word tumbled forth from your throat catching just for just a second. Just long enough you thought you might gag.

But you didn't.

That seemed to appease Blue, and it certainly made Cronus preen like a pretty little peacock. You were mostly left to nurse on your drink as you waited for your food while they canoodled in front of you.

Shamelessly.

Like a couple of teenagers.

Fortunately, it wasn't a long wait for the food, and you immediately dug in, shoveling those hash browns into your mouth like an old timey cartoon engineer shoveling coal into a locomotive. Couldn't make polite conversation with your mouth full, now could you?

And goddamn those hash browns were good. Just the right texture, and enough of the tomatoes and mushrooms that you could taste them, but not enough to overpower the potatoes. They were sublime.

Fortunately, it seemed like the two of them were content with just letting you be a third wheel after that, so you didn't have to deal much with their conversations other than a pointed comment here and there from Blue about the amount of carbs you were eating.

You ordered three more plates of food to go for that comment alone.

And as the waitress left to go get you the additional food, you were almost positive you heard Blue tell Cronus something about a gold digger.

Oh.... Right.

You were the gold digger.

They were accusing *you* of being a gold digger.

You almost launched across the table to punch them in the nose, but unlike the other two people at the table, you had restraint in spades. So you pretended not to hear it.

Because if you were a gold digger, you would probably be living in a solid gold mansion that he'd built expressly for you. Going on trips to far off lands covered in finery like some sort of alien noble.

Cronus just gave them a very disapproving look and mumbled something about you being poor.

And yeah, okay, you were poor but there was something about the way that that was why he was doing this for you rather than just... you being best friends or something didn't sit right with you.

And suddenly, this very unfun adventure was actively somewhere you needed to *Not Be* . Your orders of hash browns came out in cute individual boxes, and you thanked your waitress again.

You gave it about three minutes before you checked your phone and sighed theatrically, "Well guys, it's been so, *so* fun, but finals are coming up soon and I need to go prepare, so I'm just gonna skedaddle. "

"Awww, so soon?" Blue beat Cronus to the reply. "I feel like we only just started getting to know each other."

"Well, you know what they say: Time flies when you're having fun, and boy was I having a *blast*." You really hoped you sounded sincere.

Not that you were.

This had been absolute hell, and if you were here more than another minute, you might actually start biting someone (Blue) on the nose or something.

"Kitten, can't you stay just a few more minutes?" Cronus pouted, giving you those puppy dogfish eyes.

"No can do, buddy." You said as you stood up. "Lots of things I gotta do. Lots of papers to grade, and I have to study some shit myself too."

"Well, good luck with that," Blue waved. "We simply *must* do this again sometime."

"R-right."

At least you didn't have to cook for a while.

It had been several days, but y ou couldn't sit still , the thought of Blue and Cronus wedged firmly in your mind. Blue's perfect, skinny androgyny. Their perfect makeup and carefully manicured nails, no hair out of place. Their jeans and G ucci handbag and the way their eyes had lingered on the worn, frayed hem of your pants and well-used sneakers.

You didn't hate them.

Really, you didn't.

They just made you want to rip something apart with your teeth.

Which was silly and childish because you were stupid and got attached to Cronus, and even though they were obviously perfect for each fucking rich other, clearly Blue wasn't good

enough for him. (Not that you were good enough either).

(Not that *he* was good enough for much of anything though.....)

But he was your best friend, so you tried your best to not be weird about it because push came to shove he'd probably choose them over you anyways if you voiced any concerns.... And then it would be just you again.

Goodie.

Well, you *did* have Annuum.

But how long until Annuum found someone too? Someone perfect , and charismatic , and beautiful with flawless skin and no pores or whatever. Although they did seem to be the sort of person who kept to themself, so maybe not. You were pretty sure they weren't seeing anyone right now at least; they'd made a joke about never having anywhere to go on a Friday night.

And you... you *wanted* to tell them about Phil.

You wanted to tell Cronus too....

Wanted to tell anyone....

But no one wanted to hear about that, so you put on a brave face and acted like everything was fine because Cronus still hadn't asked you about it.

You spun around on your desk chair, waiting for Cronus to get on Overwatch and distract you from all of these stupid thoughts. (And distract you with other uncomfortable thoughts like how it would feel to have him kissing down your neck... nipping at it so gently with his sharp teeth that your skin wouldn't break. Or maybe it would as he tried to mark you up, show everyone that you were together and- that was inappropriate.)

You did your best to quell the urge to listen to Quadrant Confusion just to *feel* something other than the yawning emptiness in the pit of your stomach.

But when half an hour passed and he hadn't shown up, you did start to wonder.

And as the time slipped by, and you wallowed and moped ... you realized he probably wasn't coming. Even though he'd said he would.... Even though he'd been the one to suggest it.

You tried your best not to cry about it because that was stupid.

I guess I just don't love you as much as I thought I did.

The words reverberated in your skull, bouncing around like those cheap, technicolor rubber balls that you'd get from those quarter machines at a grocery store ; Like a child had dropped their collection of them down the stairs to watch the entropic display of rubber meeting gravity.

Or perhaps like a maraca, thoughts rattling around in your skull.

You took a few deep breathes and made your way to your bed that was less than two feet away from your chair. And you opened up your bottom drawer because your apartment was cramped enough that you could reach it from your bed. You rummaged around for a moment, feeling around before pulling out a little felt bag.

You poured out the contents, staring at the ring Cronus had made special for you. He'd gotten a matching set... you wonder if he still had his. You wondered if he remembered giving it to you.

The ring was still a perfect fit. A little heavy from the gems studded in it, but kind of perfect. He'd probably gotten one for Blue by now. He was probably planning their wedding by now .... At this rate you wondered if you'd even be invited.

Okay, maybe that was a bit of a reach.

But getting a read on Blue and whether or not they'd be down for that sort of hurtling through a relationship like a speedrunner competing on an AGDQ stream event wasn't something you were able to do after meeting them for only a few hours. But you weren't sure they seemed like they were the type to get tied down easily.

But with Cronus' massive simping proclivities you figured he'd keep tailing them as they ran around the world with their stupid rich parent money.

You wiped the moisture from the corner of your eyes.

You were a strong, independent grad student in a field that almost no one cared about. You didn't need anyone, least of all a significant other.

But by God would it be nice to exist with someone.

You should have been working on your dissertation, but even the thought of it was enough to drain the last of the energy from your body.

You admired the ring some more, contemplating selling it once more. It probably wouldn't even eat him up inside anymore if you did do it. But as much as you wanted to, you couldn't bring yourself to really entertain the thought of it fully. Because even though the thought of being a millionaire who could do whatever you wanted whenever you wanted to... It wasn't even something you could really comprehend. Besides, there was always a market for gems and the like so if you changed your mind, you could always sell it later down the line.

You closed your eyes for a moment, savoring the blissful darkness where you could wistfully ruminate on how different things would be if you had just made one decision differently.

What it would have been like if you had just accepted the ring, told him that it was beautiful. That *he* was beautiful. Let him pull you to him. Kissed him until you were light headed and giddy ; It probably would have been awkward, and clumsy, and enthusiastic. You wondered what his skin would taste like.

You wondered how different things would have been going forward.... If you'd tell Eridan about you and Cronus being an item (absolutely not). What sort of cheesy honeymoon style trips you could have gone on without getting fired or falling too far behind on your dissertation.

Spending a romantic night at the Black Swan after a day at the Alnwick Poison Gardens... taking a bath together and exploring each other's bodies as you washed each other off.... Just an excuse to touch each other.

This was... this was wrong and stupid.

You'd missed your chance, so you swallowed down your emotions and pulled off the ring and stuffed it back in the little felt bag.

It was stupid focusing on what could have been instead of what was.... Maybe you should download tinder or bumble or whatever dating apps people used these days. Maybe cupid.com? Maybe that stupid Christian dating site... that could probably be funny.

A heavy sigh escaped your lips, and you closed your eyes as though that alone would be enough to make you fall asleep. It was a start, of course.... But alas your mind continued to race with thoughts of Cronus and Blue together.

Them kissing.

Them necking.

Them fucking.

Him telling them how much he loved them, and before you knew it your jaw had begun to hurt with how hard you'd clenched it while grinding your teeth. You made the conscious effort to unclench, but resigned yourself to a night of little to no sleep.

Bringing the weed gummies you'd bought from a New York distributor to work was probably not the smartest decision you had ever made. In fact, you were in a constant paranoid state wondering if somehow, someone would take notice and report you to the dean at any minute. Not that anyone who knew you would even think to.

And Annuum was no snitch.

"Do you wanna hang out tonight?" You gave Annuum an awkward, toothy smile that was probably coming off as desperate. When they just looked at you without saying anything immediately, you keyed them in on the fact that you were holding. Because everyone loved you when you were holding... supposedly (you would test that theory out). "I bought some edibles. They're gummies. Um... weed gummies. They're supposed to be sour watermelon flavored. You seem more like the vaporizing rig kind of person, but it's pretty much the same."

The look they gave you was thoughtful but inscrutable. "I really wonder what goes through that pan of yours." They finally said neither harshly not kindly.

You just let out an awkward laugh, "Well, it's uh.... It's an Earth drug. Recreational. Umm.. I thought maybe we could share them. Maybe watch some shows or listen to music. It's supposed to enhance the experience for a lot of people."

They took a step towards you, that same look affixed to their face. And another. And another. Until you found the back of your thighs hitting your table, and still they did not stop their slow pace toward you until they were right in front of you.

They leaned in close, studying you with those uncanny green eyes . They opened their mouth, sharp teeth poking out from behind their lips. "I know the soporific's you're offering me."

Your heart hammered so hard in your rib cage you thought it might just break it's way out. There was no way Annuum couldn't hear it. Hell, the guy down the hall could probably hear it thudding away.

Because they were close. Closer than you were used to. Not side to side, but front to front. You could feel your cheeks heating up in the most embarrassing way. You needed to get laid or this was just going to be your life now, wasn't it?

Oh dear heavens, someone touched your hand. Better get all hot and bothered because that was the only touch you were getting. Or maybe Annuum would lend a helping hand. You couldn't ask that of them though. Even the thought of it made you want to crawl under your desk and die of embarrassment. .. (Why be embarrassed ? They wouldn't judge you for it. Would they?).

Their finger trailed along your cheek, leaving goosebumps in its wake, stopping under your chin to tilt it up. "I have no idea what makes you think I would want that, my friend." And then you could feel their claw prick the skin of your temple as they pressed their digit to it. "Shit rots your pan."

There was something heavy in the air as they said it, voice low and soft.

Until finally, they took a step back, hands slipping inside the pockets of their cargo shorts, and cracked a smile. "I'm not judging you if that's what you're into. But it's not something I'm keen on..." They clicked their tongue, a crackling sound buzzing from in their throat. "Sorry if I was a little intense about it. I've had a few bad experiences." Annuum licked their lips, moving to lean against the table with you. "You know they actually expose us to soporifics right after we hatch? Made us sleep in it every night. Kept our pans malleable , easy to

influence. It took me perigees to wean off it. And no one talks about it because it's like nobody knows ! Or if they do know, they don't care or actively encourage it.... "

They sighed. "Sorry, I know you're probably responsible about those sorts of things. And even if you aren't, it's your own life to live. I just... can't go down that road. Not again. My mind is my own, and hopefully it will remain that way for the foreseeable future."

You nodded intently.

(Were you supposed to pat them on the back? Were you supposed to leave them alone?)

"You know they told us that it was the only way to keep the night terrors in check? " They stared off, green eyes sort of zoning out, smile faltering. "And when you're a kid being force fed this shit, you just believe it. Because without the slime, it feels like the universe has it out for you. Like the horrorterrors themselves are trying to claw into your brain as your body shakes and writhes from the lack of it. And then you're off planet in some slurry processing center stuck alone with your thoughts because if you start talking to the other jades then the drones get suspicious and then your superviscerator gets involved and probes your brain for information until you're basically fried. But if you're alone... and you ignore everything around you and think critically shit starts not fitting into the mold and starts painting a very new picture. Like 'how did our ancestors survive without sleeping in this lab grown material that occurs in only one type of rare beetle and has to be grown in a lab? How was there enough for colonies to sleep?' So you spend all of your downtime just researching sopor slime and its effects on the body outside of those that are psychological, and you realize that it's also a growth accelerant so you start doing experiments on yourself by forcing yourself to sleep outside of it and suddenly your mind gets a *lot* harder to probe- " Annuum finally paused for a breath before giving you an apologetic look. "Sorry, that's kind of a lot more than you needed, isn't it...."

"Alternia sounds like absolute shit." You replied, mouth just a bit dry. "You don't have to apologize."

"Even so, it's not the same thing as Earth weed.... But...." They looked down at their boots, tapping the toe on the floor.

"But you're afraid of relapsing...?"

Perhaps it was presumptuous of you to finish, but by the odd look on their face, you were pretty sure you hit the proverbial nail on the head... or at least in the general vicinity.

"Something like that." They finally replied.

There was a long bout of silence between the two of you as you just stood there digesting the conversation.

"So wait," You blinked a few times. "You guys just have like... mind probes? That's some 1984 shit right there."

"No, some of the highbloods had the ability to actually mind control us."

"... What?"

"Shit's fucked up, right?" They cracked a smile again, something about it incredibly sharp (not factoring in their teeth). "But it got a *lot* harder for them once I stopped sleeping in sopor."

"So you're telling me that some of you guys can just perform casual mind control? Like it's just a fun little game for some of you guys?"

"Yup." They popped the 'p' a bit aggressively.

"That's so fucked up. What the actual fuck?" The thought of someone being privy to every single thought you'd ever had (intrusive or not) made you want to hurl. The thought of something worming its way into your mind and making you-

The Crispmass party .

The feeling of something clawing its way into your mind.

Say it.

Had that been a troll? Someone trying to mind control you to get Cronus to say something... *fuck what had he tried saying...?*

Maybe it was better if you didn't remember it at all.

You shivered, suddenly feeling very sick to your stomach, palms sweaty (hands spaghetti).

They just pat you on the shoulder, mumbling something you couldn't quite catch over the roaring of blood in your ears.

No wonder they were so cagey around highbloods. Their entire life was just one big nightmare. And too many things were falling into place.

It took a long while for your heart rate to slow back to its normal pace... for you to kneel down and busy your hands in the warm loam of the greenhouse.

"How do you know if you've been mind controlled?" You finally asked after a long, long time.

Annuum didn't respond immediately, "It's like something else is telling you what to do, and you have to do it no matter how hard you fight against it. It feels like something worming and clawing its way in. It's... difficult to miss. In most cases, it's not subtle enough to go unnoticed."

You nodded, plucking a few weeds that had managed to sprout. Purslane... a tasty treat for later.

That definitely sounded a lot like what you'd felt that night.

Say it.

What had Cronus been trying to say to you? Something about forbidden words... a name.

It was a name.

Something had wanted a name.

"Is there any way to resist those sorts of influences?"

"Yeah. Keep your mind sharp," They replied. "And if you can't resist for long, kill them when you can."

You nodded again, something dark dawning on your mind.

Annuum had killed before, hadn't they....

Cronus was drunk again. Toasted. Inebriated. Intoxicated. Absolutely lost in the fucking sauce when he finally sauntered up to you. In fact that's the first thing that alerted you to his presence, the stench of alcohol radiating off of him. You didn't turn around to face him as you heard his heavy footsteps, the soft scraping of claws along their marble floor in the air.

Your cheeks flushed as he got closer, a lump rising in your throat because he hadn't contacted you once since he stood you up. It was easy to forget about of course . (*You* were easy to forget about).

You bit the inside of your lip.

"Kiiiittennnn." He slurred, coming up behind you and slumping over you, arms caging you on either side as he rested his hands on the table. He let out a dopey little giggle, nuzzling into the back of your neck . You let out a stuttery breath, freezing in place. But if he noticed, he didn't say anything, just resting his head on your shoulder. "I missed you."

His fins fluttered against your ear, tickling and making them itch a little. There wasn't enough moisture in your mouth to reply.

"Can't wait to hang out with you like the good ol' days. Just you 'n me watchin' movies and palyin' games. It'll be so fun!"

God, you could feel his breath on your neck, and it took every ounce of self restraint in your body not to moan as he leaned against your back. That would be bad. That would be very bad, and he was very, very drunk.

He had someone, and he wasn't hitting on you. He was being friendly. Overly friendly, sure. But friendly.

Hell, you already knew that he was a very touchy, clingy, physical contact kind of person.

"Cronus, you're really drunk," You managed to eke out, "Are you alright? Did something happen?"

"What? No." He laughed and wrapped his arms around your midsection. "Blue 'n me, we just... we just like to party."

You know they actually expose us to soporifics right after we hatch?

Made us sleep in it every night.

Kept our pans malleable.

You swallowed.... Things falling into place just a little too clearly.

Cronus had been drinking a lot more lately... and he already drank a lot.

You'd always had the sinking suspicion he was a borderline alcoholic, but maybe... maybe Blue was a bad influence on someone already predisposed to substance abuse.

Though you were strangely grounded , feeling his rhythmic breathing because he didn't move for a while. Didn't speak. Just sort of leaned against you at that awkward angle until he said, "Let's go downstairs."

The troll practically dragged you away from the table and down the kitchen to the hall, and you didn't even have it in you to complain... just a weird, uncomfortable, nausea in your gut that you couldn't shake .

"What do you wanna watch today, kitten?" He asked as you reached the bottom of the stairs. "Some Hallmark movies sound amazing right now. And, and I remembered to get your favorite dumplings!" His bioluminescence flashed in the brief darkness.

"That was very sweet of you, Cronus." You mumbled, still stewing in that vague miasma of discomfort.

He pulled you to the couch, practically into his lap, and you hated how your entire body flushed at the contact because you were straddling his thigh and you could feel the contact of it on your ass. He pet your face a little too roughly a couple of times, making that soft , alien , chirping warbles .

You buried your face in his chest because goddamnit, would you even get the chance to do this again? This physical closeness that you had so sorely missed.

And suddenly everything was coming to a head. All of the emotions that you had beaten down with your metaphorical shovel and buried, each and every one of them, clawing to the surface. But you didn't cry. You were *stronger* than that.

So you just clung for a few moments... savoring the way he babbled on about the movie as he stroked your back.... That sick feeling never quite going away.

You were pretty sure it would never go away again .

Because how did you tell your friend that he was an alcoholic? How were you supposed to bring that up without overstepping? Without him dismissing you? Without him hating you? Without him thinking you were trying to drive a wedge between him and Blue...?

Blue and me, we just like to party.

Don't spoil the party, kitten.

You steeled yourself and pulled back, shifting so that you were seated next to him, not quite in his lap anymore. If this is how he chose to live his life, this was how he chose to live it. Who were you to interfere? It wasn't like you were life partners....

But you were his best friend.

(At least you had been for a little while there....)

And him standing you up wasn't... it wasn't like that had never happened with your best friends before.... (Allyson in high school on Halloween.... Crystal freshman year of college.) It was *normal*. It was easy to forget things.

(Easy to forget you).

You surreptitiously looked around for those dumplings he had said he'd gotten.

You didn't smell them.

They weren't on the coffee table... And you definitely hadn't seen or smelled them upstairs. Maybe they were the frozen kind? You wanted to ask him, but he kept prattling on about the movie, and his day, and Blue. Of course Blue.

You couldn't get him to talk about anyone else if you tried.... Even though you didn't try (But you *could*).

He reached for the bottle of vodka on the table, and before you knew it your hand was on the cap, palm down as you stopped him from bringing it closer.

"Cronus," Your voice was quivered, barely louder than a whisper (shit you were really doing this, weren't you). "I think... I think you've had enough to drink. I'm...." (What? Worried?) *Yes.* "I'm worried about you. I don't think being drunk all the time is good for you."

He huffed, "Kitten, I'm *fine* . So what if I like to party a little? It's not like I'm hurting anyone."

You finally worked up the nerve to meet his eyes, and you licked your lips. "Were you drunk when you stood me up?"

There was a flash there. Something quick that flitted across his face, and he blinked. "I didn't stand you up."

"Yes, you did. We were supposed to hang out the other day, and you didn't show up." Communication was key. You could do this.

You were strong, and you could do this. Just... let him know how you felt. Because he wasn't a mind reader, he was your best friend. He was your best friend and, "It hurt when you didn't show up. I felt... really, really upset."

Cronus' brows knit together. "I-..." He looked so incredibly lost in that moment, "Wasn't that supposed to be on Tuesday?"

"What day is today, Cronus?" You replied.

"It's- it's Sunday? No... Monday." He gave you an uncertain smile filled with what you could only describe as trepidation.

"It's Thursday." You could feel a little bit of yourself clawing at your gut, telling you to run, but.... Tentatively you swiped your thumb over the faint, barely there freckles on his cheek.

He looked simultaneously incredulous and constipated. Eyes wide. "Kitten, please say psych."

"I'm not joking."

His fins drooped.

"Cronus... I'm *worried* about you."

"I didn't mean to stand you up.... I'm sorry." He mumbled, leaning against you heavily as he put the bottle down on the table.

"I forgive you, and it's your life to live, and your decisions to make. I just... wanted to let you know that seeing you like this is concerning. I care about you a lot , and I want to be able to trust you... and when you're drunk, that becomes more difficult to do. "

You were pretty sure those dumplings weren't coming either if he thought today was Monday. But that was fine. You'd gotten your emotions off your chest (and you really wished you felt better about it instead of the simmering dread that nothing would change).

To his credit, he looked at you with those incredibly violet eyes, sad and moderately distressed. "I want you to be able to trust me." He echoed, a buzzing undercut to his voice.

You gave him a smile, and softly headbutted his shoulder. " You're my best friend."

He pulled you into his lap again, practically engulfing you with his body as he wrapped his arms around you, humming out a tune that was all too familiar, and tucking your head under his chin. And for a moment, despite the mindless chatter of the television behind you, the air hung still. He nuzzled the top of your head with a hiccup as he finished his little song.

And then he let out a heavy sigh. One of those sighs that sounded like a defeated soul escaping from between his lips. "Blue doesn't like you."

What a shock. Who saw it coming?

Certainly not you....

Just straight out of left field, that one.

You would have made a comment on it if Cronus didn't sound so damn sad.

He didn't elaborate on it.

Which was fine. You hadn't really expected him to. You weren't really sure what to say to that either... but he cradled you so despondently that you couldn't help but mumbled out, "Well, Blue is entitled to their opinion, and sometimes people just don't get along. That's not a moral failing, or even means that someone is necessarily bad. It just means that different people look for different things in a connection. Not everyone has to like me. Hell, I'm sure there's gotta be a whole lot of people out there who don't like me."

"Yeah, but *I* like you." He buried his nose in your hair and pouted, and your heart did a stupid little fluttery thing.

Because your shuckboy *liked* you.

You nuzzled into his chest and reached up to stroke his face. "I like you too. Took a long as hell time, but you've come a long way from the disgusting little sleazeball I met the first time I walked in here."

Cronus let out a soft, staticy chuckle. "My blood is your blood, until my pump's still." He murmured, voice lilting, a practiced cadence as though he were reciting a poem. "My claws are your claws, to enforce your will. My fangs are your fangs, to strike and to kill." He let out a long, low breath, "Your foes are my foes, who blood we shall spill."

It was sweet in that aggressive sort of alien way , but something about it felt... weighted . A nervous laugh escaped your lips. "Cute rhyme. Very evocative."

He hummed and held you a little while longer (certainly long enough that it couldn't really be considered decent). You knew you should go. Knew that you should finish grading papers , study for finals, and work on your magnum opus yourself....

So with a heavy heart, you extricated yourself from his embrace despite his protests of "Five more minutes, kitten."

"We'll hang out again soon, okay? But I have some deadlines that need to be met." You pat his cheek again and his fins fluttered, a rattling sound bubbling out of his throat. "You going to be okay?"

He nodded sullenly.

"Remember, it's okay if people don't like me, and maybe..." You steeled yourself, trying to find the optimism as you said the words, "Maybe one day I'll grow on them, and then we'll make flower crowns or something. Just, cheer up okay? And maybe try to cut back on the alcohol a little? I care about you."

Cronus blinked up at you, violet eyes wide and wet like little windows into the emotional center of his brain. "You mean it?"

You pressed your forehead to his. "Of course I mean it, you big lug."

He sniffled a little, following you upstairs and to the door like a shambling mound. "Drive safe, okay?"

"Thank you, I will. Sleep well."

He nodded , and you closed the door behind you.

His hand slipped under your shirt, groping at your chest, pinching and rolling your nipple between his clawed fingers . "Kitten, I'm gonna fuck you so good, you'll never want a human ever again." He purred in your ear, nipping lightly at the shell.

"Good thing I already don't want anyone else then," You pulled him in for a scorching kiss, pulling away to kiss the corner of his mouth and down his jaw.

His fins fluttered at that and you reached down to unbutton his jeans-

Your eyes flew open, already uncomfortably wet.

This was the third time this week.

You groaned and buried your head in your pillow.

Finals were fast approaching, just another two weeks left and you still had so, so much to do. You were running around like a little lost goblin going half crazy just trying to keep your head afloat. Just two more weeks (well... three really) until you could have a moment to relax. Most undergrad classes would be over and you wouldn't have to worry about grading so many lab reports all the time. You'd have a small reprieve where you could just... breathe. Maybe go camping somewhere where you could just get away from everything.

God that sounded nice.

And maybe you and Cronus could hang out more (unlikely... Blue didn't like you, and with classes being over for Eridan, you probably wouldn't even see him at all during the summer.... And then there was the chance that Eridan wouldn't even hire you back once school started up again, and boy did that thought terrify you. That income helped keep you afloat. And-)

You pulled up to the Ampora's hive. Best not to think about any of that yet.... Especially because Eridan was a bright kid who picked up on things outside of social cues relatively easily. It was very possible he wouldn't even need a tutor next year. (And where would you be then?)

The thought made you a little sick to your stomach.

Maybe you should ask him once finals were done with....

You'd gotten used to eating food that wasn't ramen.

You knocked on the door, waiting a solid minute for someone to answer. Finally Eridan did. It was always strange getting him and not Cronus. And as you went to sit down, he began to speak.

"You know, I finally met Blue the other evening." There was a pretentious little smile on his face when you looked up. "I'm not sure what they see in Cronus, but I'm glad he's finally found someone with a bit of pedigree even if they are a land dweller."

You swallowed, your stomach doing that grumbly indigestion feeling again even though you were positive you hadn't eaten anything to disagree with it.

"I always assumed a disgusting deadbeat like him would end up alone or scraping at the very bottom of the barrel. Or finding some incredibly..." He glanced at you, assessing his words carefully, " *A person of little means* and bribe them to be with him like a leach sucking on our noble wealth ."

You weren't sure what way to take that. If it was a jab at you being poor, and easily susceptible to being bribed or...

Or he didn't mean the nice things he'd said to you. About thinking of you as close to a family member as one could get with trolls.

(But he wouldn't have lied to you about that... would he? He'd been in therapy for several months now and... and he'd grown so much and...).

He'd probably want Blue to tutor him... after all, they had pedigree and had studied accounting. That was numbers.

Vaguely aware that he was still talking, you did your best to zone back in.

" They even discussed the possibility of Cronus moving out! Then I have the run of the entire hive. As I should anyway, he's an adult and he should be off planet conquering star systems. Or at least finishing his ordeals. It's pathetic, really, he's already thirteen and he hasn't even done his ordeals. At least he finally found someone to fill a bucket with."

Moving out?

Your blood was cold in your veins.

"People move at different paces, Eridan."

"I suppose. And I suppose we should really get studying. Finals are coming up and I want top marks."

So you did what you always did, shoved all of those unpleasant thoughts into a little box and filed them away to digest later.

Digest. As though you weren't going to just cry about it and bemoan another friend leaving.

God you really were pathetic.

But you had enough to focus on as it was.

Cronus didn't show up at all during the session, or even after while you were cleaning and packing up. You should just go home. You had a lot to do, and he was probably at Blue's place anyway. Probably making out and fucking and....

But before you knew it, you were heading down the stairs , then standing in front of the door to his stupid dude cavern. Everything in you told you to turn on your heel and just leave. You had a lot to do. But you opened the door anyway.

He was laying on the couch staring at the television screen, a half-finished bottle on the table. His fins fluttered as the door opened, and he turned to look at you with a morose expression on his face. He cracked you a guilty smile. "Hey, kitten."

"Hey, Cronus. You okay?"

He nodded sluggishly, patting the space on the couch by his head. You went over and sat down, and he crawled into your lap. "Mm jus' tired." He mumbled.

You took a breath and began carding your fingers through his hair. That low rumbly click began filling the air.

"'M drunk." He said after a fe w minutes, and you just nodded as though he could see it. "Told myself I wouldn't today, but I couldn't sleep and then one thing led to another...."

"Bad dreams?"

He nodded, burying his face in your stomach. " We're gonna be best friends forever, right?"

"As long as you'll have me, I think." You murmured, raking your nails gently along his scalp. "I can't stay long, but I did want to see you."

He wrapped an arm around you. "No. Stay."

"I'm not leaving right this minute, tiger."

"Stay and we can live together forever and it'll be awesome all the time."

You stifled a giggle. "You know I can't do that."

"Why? Is it because we ain't human married? I'll human marry the fuck out of you, kitten."

"Cronus, you're drunk and tired, and you have Blue." You replied, ruffling his hair.

"You, me, and Blue, we can all get married and it'll be amazing."

You shooshed him, taking his horn and wiggling it.

The moan that escaped his lips as you did was far more sensual than it had any right to be, and definitely did something for you (the pit of your stomach was already heating up) .

"Blue doesn't like me, Cronus. And besides, you seem really happy together, and Eridan likes them."

"Yeah, they're pretty great." He mumbled. "I wish they liked you. They said it's pro b - problematic that we hang out."

"Well, it's your life to live. And if you want to hang out with me, that's our decision to make, not theirs." You replied, trying to keep your voice measured (in truth, you were terrified that any moment he'd slip away too).

"Yeah."

Everything in you told you to take advantage of the time you still had with him. To milk it out until you were both sick of each other because if things continued on with Blue, he'd probably move out to LA with them come summertime. And then you'd really be alone....

But you had to be responsible and finish grading those labs by tomorrow, and you had forgotten them on your desk. You sat with him a little while longer, not saying anything. You were almost positive he was crying because he let out a little sniffle, and the front of your shirt was starting to get a little wet. Eventually his little shaky breaths began to even out into long, slow purrs as you continued to stroke and comb his hair.

"Cronus," You whispered, but he didn't answer. He must have fallen asleep.

Gingerly you shifted, sliding out from under him. He just curled up around a pillow, so you grabbed a nice, large blanket and covered him with it. You kissed his temple, "Sleep well."

He nuzzled the pillow with a loud click.

You took one last look at him before you closed the door and headed out.

Finals began next week, and it seemed like Annuum was the only one in the office keeping a level head about it. Which given some of the stories they shared about Alternia, this must have seemed so trite... or they were just very, very good at pretending. Which, honestly, you wouldn't put that past them either. But you had mounds of work to complete and only two weeks to get it all in (and you really, really wanted to make sure it was all in before you started having to hand in your own final projects for the year).

But you'd been keeping up with your papers this year (except for that brief incident with Phil that sort of tanked every ounce of energy you had for a few weeks straight...), so hopefully you wouldn't be scrambling too much to get everything finalized and ready.

And then you could focus on setting up your curriculum for the upcoming year... (even the thought was enough to fill you with unease. Another year was ending, and soon you were probably going to lose your new best friend who was barely lucid whenever you tried to hang out anymore, and you were probably going to lose your secondary source of income because there was no guarantee that Eridan would need you next year, and with inflation the way it was...). But you held your head high (barely managing to suppress everything bubbling up), and stepped out of your car.

Everything would be okay.

Everything would be okay.

Everything would be okay.

No, everything would be *great.*

Yeah. All you needed to do was repeat it in your head over and over and over and over and over until your brain reprogrammed itself to accept it.

Eridan was a bright kid, and even if he didn't need you next year, you could probably find someone else to fill that void. Some other nubile, young mind full of vitriol and violence who needed some guidance. Hell, maybe you should just focus on getting a job for now and only work on your degree while you worked as some sort of guidance counselor.

You stifled a laugh at the thought.

You knocked on the door, and Eridan answered promptly, just as nervous about finals as the rest of your students. (Well, most of them; Roxy was unflappable). He ushered you in, taking a seat at the table and sliding over a twelve page worksheet to you that covered basically everything they'd learned this year.

You spent most of the time going over it, pointing out the small mistakes that he'd made and coming up with problems to help him review and practice. Your session went long, but he compensated you for it and thanked you.

You packed up, wondering if you should go down and see Cronus... if he was even down there.... And even if he was, there was no guarantee he would be cognizant enough to recognize that you were there and not just some fever dream.... You really wanted him to be okay, you wanted to make *sure* he was okay. But you had too many things to do, and too many things to process.

Your feet refused to move for a moment as you looked in the direction of the stairs... and even though it felt like someone was trying to squeeze your heart in one of those juice pressers, you turned around and began heading out the door.

You found him sitting on the stoop , fiddling with a cigarette. He turned around as he heard the door open. He looked good, tired, but good. His hair meticulously slicked back, but there was definitely a noticeable way that his shoulders slumped that held a weariness about it. He smiled. "Hey, kitten."

"Nice to see you outside, Cronus. I was starting to wonder if you'd decided to become a basement shut in." You winked at him, hoping that your words came off as playfully as you'd intended them , and sat down next to him on the sun baked stone.

"And keep all this cooped up and away from the world?" He gestured to himself with a wide, over the top grin, "Not a chance. A body like this needs to be flaunted."

You snorted, bumping your shoulder against him (practically willing him to take off his shirt and actually flau-), "Careful, you'll have to beat those suitors away with a broom."

He laughed, and you basked in the sound. (How long had it been since you'd heard him last laugh at something like that?)

It was good to see him like this... more like himself. (You didn't detect alcohol on him, he smelled mostly like laundry detergent and a little bit like the ocean). You'd really missed him.

"Who says I want to beat them away?"

"True, true. Orgies require more than two participants."

He wiggled his eyebrows. "You offerin' to join, kitten? You and Phil wanna come make a Cronus sandwich?"

You stiffened... right, you hadn't told him....

You hadn't told anyone.

And even though you willed the words, they couldn't make it past the sudden lump in your throat.

You were both silent for a while.

"So, listen." Cronus finally broke the silence. "I was thinking... about a lot of things." He paused for a moment, twisting the cig around between his fingers, and he let out a nervous laugh. "Fuck, this used to come so easy." He licked his lips, and you couldn't help but stare. "You wanna go out with me sometime?"

Your breath caught in your chest.

"Sure."

Much Ado About Everything

Chapter Summary

Everyone's a little fucked up

Chapter Notes

God... writing this story has been... y'kno what? I'm gonna save the sappy stuff for the end :')

I just want to give such a shoutout to everyone who's stuck with this story this long... It's been such a long, long journey and all of you have been wonderful. I appreciate every comment, message, piece of art, little drabbles that people have written.... Like I'm not even sure I have the words to say how much you all mean to me. I love you all tremendously and I really hope you enjoy reading this last chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It felt as though your heart were caught in your throat, palms shaky as you said that one little word. Because everything be damned, you weren't going to let this chance slip by like you had all the others. Because even if this wasn't real, you wanted so, so badly to pretend. Because god *dammit* did you like this stupid fucking shuckboy.

Cronus let out a little laugh, "I know, I know, you're in a loving, committed relationship with the guy of your dreams, kitten. I was just playin' around. You know I don't want to overstep your bound-"

He stopped. Then blinked. Then sat stock still with a blank expression on his face, before turning to look at you.

"I said sure." You thanked whatever celestial bodies were out there (if any at all), that your voice didn't crack. In fact you even managed to sound nonchalant. Unflappable. Calm, cool, and collected.

His mouth moved wordlessly for a moment, a weird stuttery buzz followed as he exhaled.

You tentatively pressed your hand to his cheek, hoping that he wouldn't notice that it was a little sweaty because you really wanted to play this cool and not like some dumbstruck teenager talking to their crush for the first time.... Though given the way your cheeks were

flushing now, and the pounding of your heart, it was probably easy as pie to see through your careful ruse.

"I'm sorry, for a second I thought you said 'sure'." He said with an unsure smile. "But I think I might just be hallucinating. Or I'm in a dream. Deeps, did I get drunk again and fall asleep on the comfort sla- couch?"

"You heard me right, and I'm really hoping I'm not just a figment of your drunk dreams because damn this would be one boring ass dream." You just had to play it cool. Just play it cool. You were cool, and suave, and definitely someone people wanted to have a romantic relationship with. Try to play up that funnyman side.

"I dunno, seems too good to be true. Where's the sike, kitten?" Cronus asked, the cigarette tapping against his jeans.

"There is none, though I suppose I do have a clarifying question." You swallowed down some of his enthusiasm at his disbelief. Maybe he really *had* been kidding around about it and you had just misinterpreted it. "Would this be a friend date or a romantic date?"

"Depends on what you're willin' to give me," His voice was sheepish as he replied, eyes finally meeting yours fully.

(Everything).

Everything.

"Well there, chief, I was lookin' for a cool cat to tear up the town and get a burger with. Think you can handle that, stud?" You said in the cheesiest 1950s New Jersey accent you could muster, doing your absolute best not to fall into a mess. Because if you had to say everything just plain you were pretty sure you would just spontaneously combust (or break down into a blubbering little mess).

He stared blankly at you for a minute, skin becoming progressively more violet as his fins fluttered. Then he let out a little, incredulous laugh. "Name a time and place, and I'm there, kitten."

"I'm free now." You replied quickly. Probably too quickly.

Shit.

He made a startled little rattle. "Kitten, now? Don't you think that that's a little too soon? I need time to prepare. I ain't even properly dressed to take you out!"

"How about later tonight then?"

He nodded vigorously, eyes blown wide.

"Seven thirty work for you?"

He nodded again, a crackling noise filling the air.

"It's a date then."

He blinked at you, biting his lip and nodding again.

You nodded once (ignoring your burning cheeks), "Could I see your phone?"

He nodded, pulling it out and handing it to you after unlocking it.

And you did something you should have a long time ago; or you would have if you understood the language everything was in. "Actually, can you pull up your contacts list and add me?" He did as he was told, and you entered in your number. "There's a nice restaurant not too far from my apartment that I've been wanting to try. It's an Alternian/Earth fusion place called *Stratosphere* that's supposed to be a little bit ritzy. I'll see about making a reservation."

His eyes were shiny and wet, and you quickly looked away, hopping up and heading over to your car. You cast one glance back at him, waving and saying, "I'll see you tonight."

As you pulled out, you caught sight of him bolting inside in your rear view mirror.

As soon as you parked though you began to panic because holy shit you only had two hours. You only had two hours to prepare and get dressed and do everything- *Fuck.*

You still had to clean up your apartment!

You launched into a frenzy, shoving almost everything into the cabinets and washing your dishes to make sure there weren't any overly offensive odors. You really didn't think any of this through, did you? You never thought a damn thing through in your life and it was beginning to show.

Thankfully you'd done your laundry yesterday so you didn't have to worry about that. And thankfully you had taken a shower in the morning (because you had fallen asleep before you could take one the night before).

And *shit* if you were really doing this, you should probably at least *look up* troll romance customs and give yourself a crash course on the whole quadrant system (and honestly you probably should have done that a while ago given your best friend was a troll so... oopsie doopsie).

You propped up your phone on the little ledge between the wall and the faucet and read about troll customs while you brushed your- *Shit.*

You still had to make reservations.

God you were a mess.

You called up the place with your toothbrush still in your mouth, spitting out the foam as you waited for someone to pick up. The phone continued to ring, and with a start you realized it was beginning to be the meal rush. *Shit.*

Well, worse came to worst, you could just get some Chinese food or something. Maybe they would have a surprise opening when you got there. Yes. Things were going to be great.

You couldn't help but panic a little when you looked at the time. You only had forty five minutes to get dressed and get there. You stood in front of your closet for a solid five minutes stressing about what to wear.

God, dating was so fucking stupid.

You put on your best button up and slacks, and then something caught your eye. A plum hoodie with his symbol emblazoned in violet and gold.... Fuck it. Wearing his sign was supposed to be romantic, so you put that on over your shirt even though it was just on the side of being too warm.

And you pulled out the ring and slipped it on your finger. Not the ring finger on your left hand, but rather the one on your right. You weren't agreeing to marry him. You were agreeing to go on a date with him ~~(and fuck his brains out after)~~.

You checked your phone, panicking when you realized you only had a couple more minutes before you had to be out the door. You did a once-over of your apartment before heading out the door.

Maybe you wouldn't even be coming back here until tomorrow. Maybe you'd go back to his place... wait, no, you had work in the morning. It would probably be best if you went back to your place....

But then that raised the question of where would he sleep? You just had a dinky little twin bed, and he was... he was well over seven feet tall now. He probably wouldn't fit.

Oh god... oh god this was such a bad idea, but the thought of not going through with it was somehow worse, so you sucked it all up as you walked over there.

The aroma of cooking food wafted through the air and proved a needed distraction from your mind. This was just a date. This was just a date with your best friend who you already knew well. You already got along great.

There was absolutely nothing to worry about (things to be curious about however was another matter entirely... such as what was lurking in those skinny jeans of his).

You fiddled with your phone as you waited outside.

Everything was going to be fine.

He wasn't going to stand you up.

But what if he brought Blue?

Fuck, you hadn't even really factored them into the equation... you'd been so focused on Cronus and being *with* him that they had barely crossed your mind.

But now the thought of them was wedged firmly in place in your brain. You wanted to cry.... Blue didn't like you, and they were going to convince Cronus that you were just a pathetic little home-wrecker.

He probably wouldn't even show up. He'd probably just send you a text saying that he had to cancel. Or maybe he wouldn't even text at all. It wouldn't be the first time you'd been stood up. And suddenly everything was just way, way too real. You should just go back to your apartment, really. But you were patient as you waited outside the restaurant, busying yourself with your phone.

You scrolled through discord and checked your email, checking out the referral bonus from the credit card companies.... You wondered if you could get Cronus to apply and say you referred him so you could get that sweet sweet moolah....

Or you could just sell that stupid ring. It wasn't like he was going to show up anyway he-

"Kitten? Aren't you a little under dressed?" Cronus' voice broke you from your thoughts and you turned around. He had a pair of aviators on (he probably couldn't drive without them), a violet button down with a tie that you couldn't quite make out the pattern of from this distance. But it was unmistakable the way he lit up when he saw your face. And the way he looked down to see the sign boldly emblazoned on your chest. His mouth hung open for a brief minute, a soft click coming from his throat.

Say something cool. Say something cool. Say something coo-

"What's the matter, tiger? Cat got your tongue?" You gave him a wink.

YES.

You had no idea how you had managed to pull that off without stumbling over yourself, but you had, and his gills had begun to flare and his fins to flutter.

He cleared his throat, flush prominent on his face (and if you were being honest it was pretty prominent on your own as well). "You look amazin', kitten. Seriously. My colors really suit you."

You wanted to kiss him then and there, but you were hungry and nervous and, "You clean up really nice yourself." You walked over to him, and straightened his tie, and you couldn't help but blush when you realized that it was covered in little light purple mushrooms.

Had he taken the time to get this made just in case this situation ever came up?

Something about that made your heart ache uncomfortably (you could have been going steady for months now if you'd just followed it instead of worrying about how it would look if you left Phil for him).

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm getting really hungry." You said, taking his hand in yours. Hopefully there would be a spare table for you.... Though the thought of fast food then fucking in the back of his car was a very nice consolation prize if they turned you away.

Light jazz played in the background as you entered in, something soft and gentle. It was pretty crowded, and you stood there awkwardly at the hostess podium (you had no idea what it was actually called). A troll with curly horns, busy arranging silverware, said, "Do you have a reservation?"

"Sorry, no.... I, um," You floundered, god you were already looking like a dumbass in front of Cronus. Compared to someone as sophisticated and probably put together as Blue, you must have looked like such a fucking mess.

"I'm sorry, it will be an hour and a half wait for a table without a reserva-" They finally looked at you, eyes flitting between your shirt and the troll behind you, immediately shooting straight up and bowing slightly. "My apologies, highblood! I spoke too hastily. I will have a table made up for you at once."

They bowed again, before rushing off, flagging down a few servers and whispering to them. It was like a scramble as they rushed off, and you could just make out a faint, "I *know* they reserved a private booth, but they'll just have to-"

You looked up at Cronus, eyes wide, because sure, maybe he was a big deal, but outside of the time he'd interacted with Annuum, and the Christmas party, you'd never really seen him around other trolls. He didn't seem fazed at all over the hubub, giving you a wide, nervous smile.

You didn't know what to say, but you could feel your cheeks heating up so you bit your lip and stared bashfully at the floor. Maybe it would have been better to get takeout and fuck in the backseat of his car. Yeah... that would probably have been better. A lot less formality, and drama, and waiting while he looked at you like that.

Soon enough the hostess came back, "Right this way."

You were led to a small circular table just big enough for two, sheltered by a wall of ferns and bamboo. "Sorry about the misunderstanding earlier, highblood. "I hope this table is to your liking. Is there anything I can get you to start off? A beverage perhaps?"

You took a second to look through the drink menu, "What does the sweet spike fruit juice taste like?"

"Sweet and fruity. Very refreshing." They said with a smile.

"It's really good, kitten. You'll like it." Cronus blurted out, and when you caught his eye he quickly looked away, flushed a deep violet.

"I will have a glass of that then, thank you." You always wanted to try some alien food, now was your chance. (At least until you fucked it up...).

"And for you, highblood? Is there anything I can get for you? Champaign? Wine? We have a lovely vintage from Alternia I'm sure would be to your standards."

"Yes, mhmm, sounds perfect." He mumbled.

You didn't comment on it, but you did take note to watch him.... You couldn't fuck if he was drunk, and that would kind of defeat the purpose of this all, wouldn't it?

(God that sounded shallow. You were very much here for more than a quick fuck, but goddamn if you weren't a horny bitch at the moment).

(Maybe you should just skip dinner and get to the fucking part).

It'd probably be easier than muddling through an awkward date.... but the thought of being properly wined and dined was intoxicatingly tittilating.

After a few moments the waitress returned with your beverages, and you gulped your down because you needed something to do with yourself. You were awful when it came to dating. No wonder Phil had broken up with you.

No.

No.

You broke up with him.

And despite the refreshing sweetness and tang of the juice, you couldn't help but taste something bitter on the back of your tongue.

Before you knew it, half the glass was gone, and Cronus was grinning at you nervously, "Thirsty, Kitten?"

"You could say that." You gave him a hearty wink, watching his skin become a deep violet.

God he was cute.

He played with his napkin a bit,looking down at his carefully manicured claws. "You know," He broke the silence after a long moment, "I was really surprised when you said yes. To going out with me I mean. I figured I was just gonna be shot down again or somethin', y'know? We get along great, Kitten, but you never really expressed human interest."

You leaned back, taking another long draw from your glass. "Well, uh, I definitely wasn't at first, but what can I say, you've really matured a lot since we first met.... I... things change, I guess is what I mean to say." An awkward laugh escaped your lips, "If I'm honest, I kind of thought you were done asking." You took a deep breath, "*I'm pretty glad you weren't.*"

(You weren't sure how you'd even managed to say it. You didn't *do* vulnerability. You... you...).

If it was possible for him to blush harder than he already was, then he likely would have been. "Me too."

You immediately busied yourself with the menu, doing your best to keep your own cheeks from flushing. "So what do you think you're going to order?"

"That seafood bake thing looks really good."

You gave a little hum, looking over the different pasta dishes. There was one with Alternian mushrooms braised in white wine with blanched kale and tomatoes that sounded to die for.

And just like that the waiter was back over, smiling down at you both just as you were setting your menu down. "Are you ready to order?"

The timing was too perfect to be a coincidence (they were probably watching you... which means they got to listen to your awkward conversations... god how embarrassing).

You quickly placed your order and noticed that Cronus had already polished off his glass of wine which the waiter was refilling for him.

"And would you like the shells on, or off?" They asked as he put in his order.

"On."

"Do you need a refill?"

It took you a moment to realize they were addressing you, and you nodded quickly. "Thank you."

There was a moderately uncomfortable silence as they left, and Cronus sipped his wine. "You want some, Kitten?" He gestured to the bottle.

"Sure," You said after a moment, and held out your now empty glass.

"To us." He said, clinking your glasses together.

You took a few sips. It was... sour. A lot more sour than you expected, but not unpleasant. "It's nice."

There was another beat before he finally said. "So, I take it Phil's not in the picture anymore."

You winced. "Yeah, I broke up with him."

"When'd that happen?"

"On the trip."

He blinked a bit, a little click emanating from him. "That long?"

You just shrugged.

"I'm kinda surprised you didn't tell me," He gave a half cough, half laugh (wholly uncomfortable) noise.

"It... really wasn't that important." You tried to smile. Really, you did. But you had no doubt that it was coming off as more of a grimace than anything. "I didn't really want to bother anyone with it."

"You know you can tell me anything right?" As his hand enveloped yours, his fingers slid around the ring, and he looked down, breath catching in his throat. "You kept it."

"Yeah, I..." (Loved it? Didn't have a lot of pretty things? Treasured it?), "Didn't want to part with it."

You cleared your throat and changed the subject as soon as you saw his eyes grow soft. "So, how are things with Blue?"

His lips pulled over his teeth in an awkward half frown, "They broke up with me."

Poor thing.

You reached over the table to cup his hand in your cheek, meeting his gaze.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Breakups suck."

Cronus snorted. "Tell me about it."

"So... uh.... What quadrant is this date for?" You'd at least looked that much up on your way over. "Pale, red, grey, or pitch? "

For a moment his fins fluttered, and he shifted from side to side. "Human?"

....

"As in all of 'em." He finally looked back at you, grin sheepish. "Like humans."

You brought his hand to your lips, "I think that could work."

The waiter brought out some bread with oil and some sort of spread that looked a lot like red hummus as well as your juice.

You both busied yourselves with the food at hand, It was well spiced with flavors you couldn't quite place, and thoroughly enjoyable.

It wasn't long before your main course was brought out, a heavenly aroma greeting you before the plate was even set in front of you. Good lord, you could get used to mouth watering scents like that. You were too hungry to make polite conversation as you dove in, letting out a low hum as the first bite hit your tongue. It was savory and earthy, the mushrooms unlike anything you'd ever tasted before. The little bursts of sweetness from the cherry tomatoes rounded out by the savory kale, truly this was a masterful dish. You were absolutely going to get a second helping to bring home.

(It was fine. He was rich, and you were going to bang his brains out later).

He polished off another glass of wine and as he went to pour himself another, you put your hand over his. "Careful, if you drink too much we won't be able to partake in some... activities later."

He snickered, "Like sex?"

"I hadn't ruled it out."

He blanched, fins snapped straight out as a deep glub escaped him. He was positively quivering, stuttering with an awkward, too-large smile. You just winked at him and went back to eating, doing your best to pretend that your face wasn't at least half as flushed as his was getting to be.

But despite his awkwardness at your advances, you noticed that he didn't pick up the glass again, just asking for water and the check instead.

"I'd actually like to look at the dessert menu if that's okay." The waiter looked confusedly at you then back at Cronus like they were debating who to listen to. "Don't you think dessert would be lovely, Cronus?"

He nodded so fast you thought he might get whiplash.

The look on the waiter's face as priceless, shocked, moderately horrified, and impressed all at once. "Sure thing."

You settled on a mixed fruit torte, something fruity and a little refreshing. Cronus just picked at his, watching you down yours instead, eyes following your tongue as you licked your lips.

It was strange, really. The sensation of his hand in yours as you walked the few blocks to your apartment in amicable (if not a little awkward) silence. You weren't sure what to say. What were you supposed to say? Were you supposed to stay silent?

You looked up at him and he smiled nervously down at you and you realized that what you said didn't really matter in this moment because nothing really needed to be said. And as you lead him up to your third floor apartment, you realized something.

His horns were only an inch or two away from scraping the ceiling. Yeah... this was a bad idea. This was an awful, no good, literally the worst idea ever idea. "Well, this is me."

God what a dumb turn of phrase.

As though the apartment itself was a representation of yourself. You weren't some stupid character in a story where an apartment was supposed to be filled with some sort of symbolism of your mind or your world or anything silly like that. It was just a room.

Just a single room....

"Would you like to come in for some tea or something?" You asked, voice carrying a little unwanted tremble to it that you disguised with a quick clearing of the throat.

He looked around for a second before replying, "I'd love that."

He must have noticed some of the faded paint and stained hall carpet, and you felt a bubble pop in the pit of your stomach. *Now or never.*

You unlocked the door, keys jingling in the stillness of the hallway, and opened the door, leading him inside. You were glad that you took the time to clean beforehand instead of doing anything else because at least it wasn't in complete shambles. But there was no mistaking that this was a well-lived-in space. A tiny space.

And as Cronus stepped in, he snickered, "You put your bed in the foyer, Kitten?" As though there was so much more beyond this small, almost completely square box. "Kinda weird, but I like that about you. You're unconventional."

Your throat was tight, and you needed something to drink. *Fast.*

When you didn't say anything, he looked down at you, face falling as though to say "Damn, Bitch, you live like this?"

You cleared your throat, pushing past him.

"Kitten? This can't *really* be it, right?"

You gestured for him to take a seat at the table, but he just stared at you, completely bewildered. "So, you're like, *actually poor* poor?"

You took a step back (you *knew* this was a bad idea), "Does that change anything?"

"What? No. *No.*" He gave you a soft smile, "Well, maybe a little, but not in a bad way or nothin'." He walked over and tilted your chin up, brushing your cheek with a cool thumb, "You should just come live with me is all I was thinkin'."

The tightness in your throat was back, but you managed to beat it back with a laugh. "No thanks. I like my independence."

"But-"

"No buts." You pulled out your meager tea collection and offered it to Cronus as he stood awkwardly by the counter, you could only hope that if he sat down that your chair wouldn't collapse under him. That would be so awkward and uncomfortable and very, very unsexy. (He'd already noted how small your apartment was... the last thing you needed was for him to realize how shoddy your furniture was too).

And maybe... maybe this was a mistake.

To invite him back here.

But goddamn you had to admit you wanted him more than anything.

"What would you like?" You asked him, doing your best to be a gracious host.

His eyes never left you as he chewed on his bottom lip, and after an almost uncomfortably long silence where you pictured no less than three surfaces you wanted to fuck him on, he finally let out a breathless whisper. *"You."*

"You already have me." You replied without a second of hesitation, realizing just how clingy it must have sounded.

He didn't seem bothered by it because he let out a low *glub*. "I wanna kiss you."

Your breath caught in your throat.

Say something cool.

Just say something cool and then you could kiss and he wouldn't think you were such a pathetic, undeserving, little worm.

But no words came, so you just took his tie in your hand and tugged him gently forward until he was right in front of you.

For a moment, the world was still, his eyes eggy and imploring.

And you leaned in, pressing your lips (that you were sure were probably more chapped than should have been particularly pleasant) to his. They were cool much like the rest of him, and he froze against you for a moment before melting into it, chaste thing that it was.

He trailed after you as you pulled back, eyes half-lidded as he let out a shaky little breath.

Yeah you were completely normal about this. Completely cool, calm, and collected, and not at all feeling like a schoolkid way out of their depth. Not at all like your bones were made of jelly or your cheeks radiating heat like the sun itself. "Well, was it everything you hoped for?"

He let out a chuckle, and he definitely said something because you saw his lips move, but you pulled him in again, kissing him with fervor, hand coming up to tangle in his hair. Without even a moment of hesitation he pulled you in, pressing your body against his as he deepened the kiss, almost but not quite crushing. You pulled away after a moment to catch your breath before diving right back in, nipping at his bottom lip and soothing it with your tongue.

Cronus moaned into your mouth, hand sliding down until he was firmly grasping your ass, giving it a squeeze. You curled your fingers in his soft hair, licking into his mouth, and he pulled back just enough to say a sheepish, "Careful, sharp teeth," as though this was something he'd had to warn people about before.

You almost wondered what the story behind that was, but you were far, far to distracted by his breath on your lips, and you pulled him back in. Swallowing down a moan, you nipped his lip again, licking into his mouth then against the flats of his teeth. You were mindful of the edges though, and he let out the breath he'd been holding in, tangling his tongue with yours.

He tasted a like dinner, but you hadn't really expected any different. He explored your mouth for a moment, a low whirring click emanating from his chest.

You grabbed his horn and he let out a low growl that melted into a moan as you pulled his hair. You wanted nothing more than to say something cool like, 'Easy there, Tiger.' or... or-

His hands wandered down your side, gripping your hips, your thighs, sliding along your back like he was doing his damndest to memorize every crease of your body and it really, *really* did something for you because before you knew it, you were backing him up so that he was against your wall, hand that wasn't gripping his horn coming down to his shirt, starting to fumble with his buttons.

You broke away to mumble out a breathy, *"God I've wanted to do this for forever now,"* as you kissed down the corner of his mouth, trailing sloppy kisses along his jaw and flaring gills.

He let out a whimper, gasping, curses tumbling from his mouth like leaves on an autumn breeze. His claws scraped your scalp as he pulled you in closer, "Careful," He panted, "Gill plates."

You bit him in response, and he whined pathetically as your teeth dragged along his skin.

This was taking too long.

Impatiently, you let go of his horn and used both hands to unbutton his silk shirt. You needed more.

So much more.

Heart pounding so hard you were afraid that it was going to break free from your ribcage, you nipped his neck again. You cursed, your fingers weren't fast enough and you mumbled out a quick, "Help me take this off."

He wasted no time in following your orders, ripping it off so quickly that some of the buttons went flying all over your apartment. He tossed it onto your chair and began tugging off his undershirt only for it to catch on his horns and tear, but he didn't seem to care in the slightest as he looked at you, waiting for your approval... for some reaction because all you could do was stare at him.

And you decided that you were wearing far too many clothes, so you quickly pulled off the hoodie and shirt you were wearing. His look was nothing short of reverent when your eyes met once more, and it made your heart jump into your throat like a lump of stale bread, so you pulled him in for another heated kiss, tongue dancing with his (Blue must have really

given him some kissing lessons or something because he was actually fairly good at it... enough to whisk your breath away).

Then he pulled away, kissing your jaw and your neck, down your shoulder and clavicle then back up again to suck a hickey into your skin. He breathed out your name like a prayer and you held him close, nails scraping his scalp, one hand resting on his horn before yanking him back so you could kiss him again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

His hands moved lower, though not without hesitance, playing with the band of your trousers. "May I?" He whispered.

You bit your lip and nodded.

This was happening.

This was happening.

You were going to fuck your best friend the alien.

Why the hell did your brain have to say it that way...?

Cronus slowly undid the button and zipper of your pants, letting them fall into a pool on the floor. You let out a breathy little laugh then shoved him onto your bed. It groaned under his weight, and he licked his lips as he looked at you... very, very out of his depth like he wasn't quite sure how to proceed.

"First time with an alien?" You joked, trying to lighten a little bit of the heated tension, and he fumbled for a second, not quite meeting your eyes.

"F-first time."

It hit you like a Mac truck going ninety on the freeway. "Oh... um....." You weren't really sure how to respond to something like that. "Look, if you want to slow down, or ease into it, I don't want to pressure you. Your first time should be romantic and sweet, not..." *In a shitty appartment on a twin sized mattress.*

"Don't. Don't want anyone else."

His deep violet eyes locked on yours and it was like all of the air had been knocked out of your lungs. Like you'd forgotten to breathe. And you gave him a nervous smile because....

Well....

He wanted you.

And that little voice in the back of your head kept telling you to back away from the bed, from him, because it was all too *real*.

Too important.

And what if you weren't able to satisfy him? You *had* meant to look up how to... well... you know, but you hadn't and what if you were bad at having alien sex and his first time was a complete and utter disappointment?

(You were a complete and utter disappointment).

No. *No.*

You both wanted this, and sure, maybe you were clueless about his anatomy, but that didn't change how you felt about him.

You pressed a kiss to the palm of his hand.

"I-" He let out a high little whir, "I'd like to try something if that's okay."

"Yeah, I trust you. What is it?"

He slid off of the bed until he was kneeling in front of you, staring up at you with those beautiful eyes of his. "I wanna eat you up."

"What?" Oh god you really, *really* should have looked at how to have alien sex.

"You know, eat you up? With my tongue." He bat his eyelashes, pouting.

It took you a few moments, "You mean like oral sex?"

"Yeah! Exactly like that. I'll be careful with my teeth, I *promise.*"

You deliberated for a moment, thinking about those sharp teeth next to your bits and it was... terrifying (and a little exhilarating). Taking a deep steadying breath, you nodded. "As long as you're careful."

His following nod was earnest, and with trembling hands, he took the band of your underwear and pulled them down your legs until they lay in a puddle at your feet. Stepping out of them, you watched as his pupils dilate. Cronus ran his palms over your skin, looking incredibly out of his depth still, and pressed a kiss to your stomach.

Then another.

And another.

And another.

Working his way down until he pulled your leg over his shoulder to get access, pressing a kiss to the insides of your thighs, sicking a hickey into the delicate skin there.

You ran your hand through his hair, lightly scraping his scalp with your nails.

And for a brief moment, time stood still as he leaned forward and placed a tentative kiss on your mound before licking a broad strip along your slit.

His tongue was cool, and you couldn't help the gasp that escaped from your lips. He did it again, gently enough that you could barely feel it. You whispered a few words of encouragement, and emboldened, he spread your lower lips with his fingers and dragged his tongue along your seam with a bit more force, tip connecting just briefly with your clit, but it was enough to pull a moan from you. "Right there, Cro."

He nodded with a soft click, lapping at your bud again and making you squirm. He said your name like a prayer between working his tongue near your entrance, and you absolutely keened when he slid in. It had... been a while, and the coolness of his tongue as it curled inside of you was enough to knock the wind out of you. You gripped his horns for dear life, and he faltered for a moment, moaning heavily, tongue still buried in your sex.

You were going to- to melt into a puddle.

His technique wasn't the best, you'd admit, but his enthusiasm more than made up for it. His thumb rubbing at your clit while he lapped up your juices with his long tongue. It took a little while longer than you expected, but you could feel the tension in your gut steadily building, breath coming in quick gasps as you moaned out his name.

His tongue found the right spot just as the pad of his finger circled your pearl, and you unravelled, grinding yourself against his mouth as your walls fluttered around him. But he didn't stop his ministrations, didn't give you a moment to come down, fingers and tongue still working furiously, and you could see his awestruck eyes taking you in as you looked down.

Your legs were shaking so hard you thought they might give out, but hanging on this cusp of too much was... exhilerating. Finally you had to tap out, tugging at his hair until he finally released you.

"Did I do good?"

You snorted, "You were excellent." And he'd probably only get better (That thought was enough to send a little jolt of hunger through you).

His ensuing smile was brighter than the sun, and you tugged his horn so that he'd come stand up, giving him a kiss when he followed your unspoken instruction. You sat on the edge of your bed, giving your jelly legs a rest and patting the spot next to you.

He sat there, all nervous energy and the pride of accomplishment written all over his face. Sliding your hands along his thigh, you leaned up and whispered, "You've been very good all night, and good boys deserve a reward, don't they?"

He made a sound that you'd lovingly dubbed the giant cicada buzz, fins flicking as he nodded. "Yes please." It was barely more than a strangled whisper, and you brushed your fingers down the sides of his face.

You kissed him again, tasting yourself on his tongue as you slowly laid him back until you were straddling him, kissing along his face, and jaw, his neck, running your tongue along the membrane of his fins as he gasped and writhed under you. "You want me to kiss every inch of your skin?"

He nodded frantically, and you followed up by sucking a hickey into his thick neck.

"Do you want me touch you? Make you feel things you only thought were possible?" You breathed against his fin. "You want me to lick your bulge like an ice pop, don't you?"

He nodded again and you ground your leg against his crotch, drinking down his keen with a deep kiss. "I need you to use your words, Cronus," You murmured as you came up, tucking a stray hair behind his fin.

"Yes! YES *PLEASE! By the Empress please PLEASE!"* The poor man was practically sobbing, quivering under you.

And that was all you needed to hear as you kissed your way down his chest. (At least your relationship with Phil had made you good at making consent into dirty talk).

You could do this.

You could give an alien a blow job.

Definitely.

And you were only mildly (incredibly) nervous.

You fumbled with his belt, brushing over his bulge with your palm as you kissed the little scar from when the car had hit him, and he positively seized under you, back arching as he let out a warbling cry. And then he slumped, a dazed look on his face.

Oh god....

Oh god he'd just blown his fucking load in his pants hadn't he?

The slowly dawning mortification on his face had you scrambling back up to pap his cheeks. "It's okay, babe. It's okay. It happens to everyone."

He looked like he was about to cry.

"Shhh shhhh shh." You stroked his face, peppering him with kisses.

He parted his lips as though to speak before closing them again with a silly little squeak.

"Hey, hey," You gave him the gentlest smile you could manage, "Let's get you all cleaned up, okay? We can try again later."

He let out a glub, "How embarrassing.... Came in my fucking pants like an idiot...."

"Hush." You kissed the tip of his nose. "Now lets get you out of these pants. That sound good?"

Cronus nodded, shimmying out of his pants that were now stained a deep violet inside. You tossed them on the floor, along with his damp violet undies. The first thing you noticed was a distinct lack of bulge where you were sure you'd felt one earlier, and as you began to slowly wipe away some of the slimy... goo... jizz... you realized that he had a set of lower lips as well.

You could work with that.

You kissed as you cleaned, tossing the towel next to his discarded clothes.

"You doing okay?"

"Yeah...." He mumbled into your pillow, turning just enough to chance a glance at you.

"Do you need anything?"

"Just my pride back."

You snickered, standing up and moving over to the fridge to get him a glass of juice anyways. He accepted it graciously and downed it like a shot. You wanted to tell him to slow down, that juice was hella expensive, but he'd probably just buy you so much that you'd have nowhere to put it. So instead, you kissed him, putting the glass on your desk before straddling his lap again.

Deeply. Again, and a gain, nipping at his lip, sucking on his tongue, exploring his mouth. Only stopping so you could catch your breath. "What about now, Tiger?"

The low moan Cronus let out did not escape your ears.

"I'll take that as a yes."

He nodded emphatically. "Please, *please, PLEASE."* Chanting your name as you worked your way down his body with your lips. When you finally reached his abdomen, you slid a finger along his folds and felt him shiver under you, his hands fisting your sheets as he crooned. But you just kept that gentle contact, lightly gliding along until your pad found a dip.

"How you holding up up there?" You asked, meeting his gaze, the flush on his cheeks making him more purple than you'd ever imagined.

"Please don't stop! Kitten, I need you in my nook so bad it ain't even funny," He gasped, arching his back.

"Are you sure that's what you want, chief?" You teased him, batting your eyes innocently.

"*PleasePleasePleasePlease*-"

You eased into him, just one finger, gently curling it and his head fell back, a heady moan spilling from his throat, a deep, clicking rumble issuing from his chest. You chuckled, exploring his cool wetness, noticing three lumps in his front wall. You inserted another finger, massaging the area and he absolutely howled out your name. There was no way in hell your neighbors hadn't heard him, and something about that sent a hunger through you that you couldn't quite describe.

He gyrated against your fingers like it was the most important thing in the world.

(Because it was).

You pulled your fingers out and Cronus let out a pathetic whine, peering out at you from between where his hands had snapped up to cover his blushing face, and when you made damn well sure that you had his full attention, you made a show of licking your fingers for him. The sound of a fishing reel being cast filled the room, his fins flapping wildly. "*You're killin' me,"* He wheezed.

He tasted sour. A lot more sour (and much more viscous) than you initially expected. Sour and briney, not the most pleasant, but certainly not the worst thing you'd ever put in your mouth. And it was more than worth it to watch him floundering around bashfully.

You lowered your lips to his nook, licking a long stripe up to the top where you noticed something akin to a clit was poking out that you could have sworn wasn't there before. It twitched against your tongue and you could hear his horns scrape against your wall.

(Yeah, there was no way you were getting your safety deposit back).

(Not that that mattered much when you had one of the richest men in the cosmos screaming your name as you ate him out).

You dipped into his nook, wiggling your tongue against those bumps.

"*Shiiiiiiit! Please keep playin' with my globes, Kitten,*" He managed between incoherent babbles, so that's exactly was you did. Tonguing them furiously until you felt something cool and slimy trail across your cheek.

You shot back, staring at a slowly growing, slick purple... appendage peeking through the top of his folds.

Oh.

OH.

Yeah, you were not expecting it to move.

You'd been on the internet long enough to know where this went.

You took a steadying breath, watching it as he watched you, before finally mustering up the courage to trail your fingers along it, grasping what you were pretty sure was the base and gently gliding your hand up and down it. You tamped down the very, very unsexy thought

comparing it to a slimy ol' tentacle, and reminded yourself that this was part or your best friend.

(And there was no way in *hell* it was going to fit inside you).

It was fine though. You'd make it work.

Your other hand wrangled the tip and you took a lick, feeling a divot.

You sucked on the tip, listening to his hiss and screech, claws making an awful tearing noise against your sheets. Not that you could blame him. (You could charge him though).

You smirked at the thought, resisting the urge to gag as you took more of him into your mouth.

You could do this.

You could handle a little squirming.

It was just like a really, really thick tongue.

You stroked him as you bobbed on the tip, reveling in the way he fell apart at your touch. You had to sit up, after a moment though... it still took some getting used to, so as you stroked him with one hand, you massaged his globes with the other and his eyes rolled back in his head, sounds no longer coherent in the slightest, but when you went to lick him again, he curled his fingers in your hair and shook his head, a very serious look on his face.

Immediately you stopped what you were doing. "Everything okay, Cro?"

"*Amazing*," He panted. "*Don't wanna...*" His tongue slid over his lips as he tried to find the words, "*Finish too soon. Wanna be in you.*"

You couldn't help the heat that pooled in your gut. He wasn't gonna *fit* but by god you were gonna give it the old college try. Nodding, you kissed him on the lips. "I think I can oblige that."

You gave him a moment to cool down while you kissed him lightly along his jaw, fingers trailing lightly along his chest, slightly sticky with his secretions (*god* how fucking clinical could you get).

It was a solid minute before he nodded, kissing you fervently, and you had to take another breath to steel yourself.

You could do this.

You wanted *to do this.*

So you lined his squirming tip up with your entrance and slowly, slowly took him in. So, so strange was his coolness though it was balm to your overheating body. You paused for a

moment, focusing on the alien feeling of him undulating within you, your breath becoming ragged as he brushed up against just the right spot.

Finally, you sunk down more on him, listening to him croon about how hot and tight you were and letting that fuel you. And then he curled inside of you, doubling back on himself when you thought you couldn't take anymore, giving you another solid inch or two, just on the tightrope between full and *too much.*

But you didn't have a moment to adjust because he kept *writhing* within you in the most delicious way and you couldn't help but moan out his name, watching his eyes as he drunk you in. The wind was knocked out of you as he rocked up, and your back arched, hands splaying themselves out on his chest.

You scrambled for purchase on something, *anything*, but your nails were useless against his thick skin, so you clenched around him in retaliation, and he yowled for you. You dug your fingers in his hair, pulling him in for a kiss as you bucked your hips, fueled by the knowledge that this was Cronus.

This was your best friend.

This was....

You let our a gasp as he pressed just a little too deep, quickly pulling up and shaking your head. "*Too much.*"

He nodded, one hand grabbing your hips while the other rolled a nipple between his fingers.

Your eyes met, and you pulled him in for another kiss.

And another.

And another.

Chanting his name between them, watching the way his jaw went slack when you did, relishing the way his claws left little pinpricks on your skin as he struggled to be gentle. *So, so gentle with you.*

Finally he pulled back, "*Bucket."* The lone word tumbled from his swollen lips.

You snickered, but slowed your hips in case that was somehow his safe word as you asked, "Everything ok-"

People always liked to talk about the way it felt when someone came inside, but they were usually pretty wrong about it feeling like something was shooting inside.... But this... was cool, and viscous, and it didn't stop coming. Spurting inside you as his eyes fluttered shut, fins quivering, the muscles in his neck tensing for several moments, fingers digging into your skin hard enough that you were sure there would be hand shaped bruises on your hips. And just when you thought there wouldn't be more, it just didn't *stop.*

It had to be at least a minute before he slumped back, a blissed out look on his beautiful face.

You could feel his essence leaking down your thighs, his bulge still coiled inside of you.

"Sorry for that," Cronus mumbled, running a hand through his hair then over his face. "Didn't think I'd finish so fast.... Shoulda thought about that beforehand that was my b."

You snorted, leaning forward until you were laying on his chest, still very, very aware of his bulge. "Yeah, probably. But I'll just chalk it up on my mad alien sex skills." Taking his hand in your own, you pressed a kiss into his skin. "What can I say, I just make all the extraterrestrials go wild."

He laughed, looking at you with the softest expression you could have ever imagined, his large violet member now slipping out of you, another wave of that viscous fluid dripping out behind it. His bright eyes shone with wetness, little droplets forming at the corners. "*Shit...*" He whispered, "You really are my favorite person in the whole world, you know that, right?"

"I bet you say that to all your intergalactic squeezes." You winked (perfectly deflected).

"Only the hot ones." Wiping his eyes he sat up a bit. "Shit... you didn't cum, did you?"

"Eh, don't worry about it," You brushed him off. "You got me off earlier, so we'll call it even."

He pouted, looking you up and down, his hands sliding to your mound then clumsily between your folds and you let out a content sigh.

"Well, how can I say no to that face." You grinned, grinding down on his fingers. He used both hands, pumping into you with two fingers while playing with your clit with the other. You rocked against him, letting the tension build until you were on the precipice.

It wasn't the most mind blowing orgasm you'd ever had, but it was probably the most memorable as you locked eyes with him, those brilliant violet irises contrasting with the vivid yellow of his scleras so full of wonder and....

And you... you laughed, a breathy chuckle as you pressed your forehead to his, something lingering near the tip of your tongue, but just out of reach.

"Alright, big guy, lets get cleaned up. You owe me new sheets, by the way."

You kissed him again as you got up, taking stock of how fucked your bed was (and how fucked the wall was (not to mention how fucked you were), noting that the entire building probably knew you'd just had fucked Cro's brains out).

He whined, making grabby hands at you, but you just swatted them away. "C'mon, I'm literally dripping with your cum right now and it doesn't feel quite as sexy as it sounds."

But he just gave you a massive, goofy grin, drinking the sight of you in as he got up. "You look so hot right now. Wanna go again, Kitten?"

The thought was tempting, but you were feeling kind of grungy so you shook your head, "Maybe in a bit."

You got yourself cleaned up, throwing on a pair of shorts, but not bothering with a shirt. You were too tired to take a full shower now, and it wasn't like his cum wasn't going to be leaking out of you for at least several hours. It didn't make sense to wear underwear yet.

You helped clean him off with a damp washcloth as well, and you gave him your emergency toothbrush that you never opened the package for, and you brushed your teeth in silence, flicking each other with water after rinsing.

It took only a couple of minutes before you were curled up together, playing some silly troll cartoons on your laptop while he nuzzled into your neck.

You turned to look at him, your eyes locking again, the silence no longer awkward. God the way your heart fluttered made you feel *young*... like a schoolkid with a silly little crush, and you smiled. And his expression was so tender and....

"I love you."

You went stock still, breath catching in your throat as his words hit your ears.

"No you don't."

It was out of your mouth with an awkward laugh before you had a chance to register anything else.

He stiffened under you.

"I don't know why I said that." You quickly amended.

Cronus didn't look at you. "I think- I think I should go. Yeah... I should uh-" He went to get up but you put your hands on his chest.

"Cronus, Cro, Wait... I didn't mean that." You mumbled, wrapping your arms around him. "I'm sorry. That was stupid of me, I just... have trouble with that word."

He didn't say anything, and you looked up at him. "Let me make it up to you... please?"

Finally, he let out a long, low sigh before giving you a tired smile. "And just how will you be makin' it up to me, Kitten?"

You gave him your most sultry (and not at all panicked) smile. "How would you like me to make it up to you?"

"Well who can say no to that sweet little nook of yours around my bulge?"

You pulled him in for a kiss, chaste at first but building in intensity. You only needed to slip out of your shorts and straddle him, slowly rubbing yourself against his sheath. It didn't take long to coax his bulge out, and you reached back to slip your fingers into his nook while he slid into you.

"I really am sorry." You murmured as you rode him, locking eyes with him. "I really didn't mean what I said then."

Cronus let out a low moan as he bucked up into you. "Sometimes we all say stupid shit we don't mean." His back arched as you clenched around him again, biting your lip as he got just a little too deep again. (Physically or emotionally?) "But please never doubt that ever again. Please never," He pressed his forehead to yours, panting, "*Ever* say that again."

"I promise."

"*Shit,*" He hissed. "Where you want it, Kitten?"

And like an idiot, you replied, "*Inside.*"

Because even though it was sticky and awful to clean up, the thought of him leaving part of himself inside of you... made you unravel and you felt the tension in you snap as you were flooded with a deep, guttural moan from the man inside of you. You fluttered around him, letting out a soft cry as you ground down on him, very much entering the *Too Much* zone, and never wanting to turn back.

You came down around the same time that he did, burying your face in his chest (and discretely rubbing away the pinpricks at the edge of your eyes).

"Come live with me," He whispered after a while.

You rolled your eyes. "That's not happening."

"Please? I promise it'll be the best thing ever."

You snorted, just shaking your head. It was hard maneuvering yourselves into a comfortable position on your tiny, dinky little twin bed, but you somehow managed it, and you were too wiped to do much more than hum to him while he talked.

Darkness greeted you as your eyes opened. Oh... you'd fallen asleep, a thick arm curled around you, trapping you in place. But you were sticky and gross, and very, very aware of every single word you'd said last night. And as much as you tried breathing exercises and calming meditative thoughts, your heartrate had begun to rise.

It was *Too Much.*

Everything was Too Much.

You had to...

You had to get out of here.

Quickly, you managed to squeeze yourself out from beneath the arm caging you, running over to the bathroom to wash your face. But the cool water wasn't *enough.*

You couldn't stop the rapid breaths, ragged, almost gasping.

I love you.

No you don't.

What the actual fuck.

You turned on the water for the shower because maybe, maybe if you scrubbed hard enough, it would be okay. Maybe the water would calm you down. Maybe after *things would stop being too much.*

The hot water did little to mask the tears that began to fall.

I love you.

No you don't.

I guess I just don't love you as much as I thought I did.

Do you know what it's like to deal with the emotional neglect you put me through all the time?

God you were such a fucking mess.

Disgusting.

Small studio-

You heard your name and a soft knock on the open door, "You okay in there?"

Looking out from the crack between the shower curtain and the shower wall you saw Cronus standing there in the pair of basketball shorts you'd let him that looked like mini jogger booty shorts on him. His horns nearly scraping the ceiling, shoulders almost too broad to comfortably fit through the door frame, and you let out an annoyingly loud sob.

He was too big.

You were too small, too fragile, too- too-

"Can I come in?"

You wanted to tell him to leave for his own good, but you nodded instead, rasping out a quiet, "Yeah," when you realized he couldn't really see you.

He stepped in and caught your eye from the crack, coming to squat down on the rug outside the shower. "You hurt?"

You shook your head, "No."

He held out his hand, and you reached out of the shower to take it. "You wanna talk about it?"

You shrugged, drawing in a long breath. "I don't know why I said it.... I just have issues with that word. Like who the fuck just responds with 'No you don't' when someone says they love them?"

"Well, apparently you do." There wasn't any malice in his voice that you could detect, but goddamn if that didn't make you sob harder than you already were. "But at least you can acknowledge it was pretty fucked up?"

"Yeah... I guess...."

"Mind if I join you in there?"

You opened the curtain, shower spray covering the floor as he quickly stepped in.

It took a lot of skill and fitting together like puzzle pieces for you both to sit in your little shower, but you somehow managed. You straddled his lap, burying your face in the crook of his neck, just... letting the water flow over your back.

You heard Cronus whisper your name again, reverently like it was something holy, "Kitten, what happened with Phil?"

It was like your throat was full of marbles, choking the words from you, and it took you longer than was decent to answer, "He cheated on me."

"... Oh, Kitten...." Cronus' arms tightened around you, kissing the top of your head.

God... this was just the sort of thing you had wanted to avoid because now the tears were really out in full force, but you steeled yourself, and you told him everything.

And to his credit, he just sat there and listened.

"And he said, '*I guess I just don't love you as much as I thought I did.*'" You finished, wiping your gross nose on the back of your hand and letting the water whisk the snot away.

"Do you want me to kill him?" He asked quietly, "Do you want me to rip into his soft little human throat with my teeth and leave him to bleed out on the ground? Just say the word and I will."

You snorted, accidentally getting some water up your nose and coughing. "No, I'm okay, thanks. He deserves to live his miserable pathetic life."

"I think you're far too generous." He muttered, kissing your head again.

You settled down, "Yeah, I think that might have fucked me up a little." It wasn't hard to admit now that it was out in the open.

"It's okay to be a little fucked up. I still love you."

Something in your chest tightened hard enough that it hurt and you wanted nothing more than to melt into him to let him know just how important he was to you.

You hadn't realized you'd said it out loud until Cronus replied with a, "God, you're so weird. I love that about you."

You laughed, a soft little sobby chuckle that echoed off of the shower walls.

"Have you thought about maybe going to therapy?" He asked after a little while.

You shrugged, "I know I probably should, but I don't exactly have the money for it."

"What if I paid for it?"

For a moment all you could think about was the power it would give him over you. No, that wasn't fair to him. He wasn't that kind of person anymore.... But even still, "I'll figure it out, don't worry."

He just nodded. "You know I'll never be able to not worry about you, right?"

You snickered.

"You know you're why Blue broke up with me," He said.

"What?"

"Yeah, whenever they went to touch me I'd call out your name."

"Ooo, Cronus had a cruuuuush."

Both of you laughed at that, the sound probably waking up a couple of your older neighbors.

And you held him tight as your laughter subsided, pressing a soft kiss to his chest.

And maybe... maybe it wasn't love. Or maybe it was.

But it was powerful whatever it was, and in that moment you realized it didn't matter what label the world wanted to put on it, because it wasn't for the world to decide what it was. Whatever was welling in your chest was yours, and yours alone to share, and Cronus?

You looked up at him, kissing him with every ounce of yourself that you could.

Even if this wasn't love yet, the thought of loving him wasn't so scary anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Is it okay if I get emotional for a little while?
It has taken me two years to write this thing, and I never expected it to become something so deep, and rich, and powerful. As many of you know, this story in its entirety was supposed to originally be about maybe 2-3k words of smut. Period. That's it. But my brain is weird so I couldn't just rest and I... somehow ended up falling in love with this asshole the more I pondered how this would happen.
Never did I expect to write an actual novel length story with eugh character development *gag*, but somehow I did it, and I loved basically every minute of it.
I could never have done this without all of you guys. Seriously, I really couldn't, and even if I had completed it it probably would have been like maybe 20k words max. I just...
Yeah. I hope that the conclusion for this was satisfying, because I worked really hard on it.
That being said, this isn't the last I'm going to be writing our dear reader and Cronus, this is only the beginning.... After all, there are still the bad ends and epilogues to write
And it doesn't have to stop with me either, these characters are free to use because who tf's gonna stop us? The cops? NO!
Just... yeah I love all of you

Thank you for reading

♥♥♥

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!